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January 21st: Jeremiah 20 & 1 Corinthians 4:18—5:13

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Alastair Roberts

Jeremiah curses the day of his birth. Cleanse out the old leaven.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah, chapter 20. Now Pashur the priest, the son of Imr, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin gate of the house of the Lord.

The next day, when Pashur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, The Lord does not call your name Pashur, but Terah on every side. For thus says the Lord, Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on.

And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall strike them down with the sword. Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah, into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and

carry them to Babylon.

And you, Pashur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely. O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived.

You are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock all the day. Everyone mocks me, for whenever I speak I cry out, I shout violence and destruction, for the word of the Lord has become for me of reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name, there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in. And I cannot, for I hear many whispering, Terror is on every side, denounce him, let us denounce him, say all my close friends, watching for my fall. Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him.

But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior, therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me, they will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed, their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.

Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, a son is born to you, making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity, let him hear a cry in the morning, and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great.

Why did I come out from the womb, to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? In chapter 19 Jeremiah had performed the symbolic action of smashing the earthenware decanter at the potsherd gate, before the elders of the people and the elders of the priests. Then he returned into the city and delivered a message of judgment in the courtyard of the temple. Jeremiah had made himself an enemy of the establishment, and the chief officer of the temple, Pasher, who seems to have been a leading administrator or superintendent, a sort of officer policing the temple precincts, punishes him by placing him in the stocks.

Jack Lumbum notes the similar conflict between Amos and Amaziah the priest of Bethel in Amos chapter 7 verses 10-17. There Amaziah tried to shut up the prophet, and judgment was declared upon him and his household as a result. There are references to Pasher's family of Emma in the book of 1st Chronicles.

Pasher has Jeremiah beaten and places him in the stocks at the gate. This is likely an attempt to silence Jeremiah by intimidating him. We don't know exactly what these stocks would have involved, they may only have constrained the legs, but perhaps also the arms and the neck.

The person in the stocks would have been placed in a contorted and painful position for a long period of time, and held up for public shaming. The next day Jeremiah, however, is uncowed. He declares that the Lord now calls Pasher terror on every side.

This isn't a play upon Pasher's name, it merely changes his name. He himself had prophesied falsely and had tried to terrorise Jeremiah, and now he will become synonymous with the exile and the captivity that Jeremiah is declaring. He is punishing Jeremiah, but he faces a much harsher punishment himself in the future, the torture of seeing his family and his friends die around him, and knowing that he had a hand in their fate.

He himself will be torn away from the land, and will die in Babylon, him, his household, and his friends of the ruling class. Here, for the first time in the book, we are told that Judah will be given into the hand of Babylon. The threat from the north is finally given a name.

And Jeremiah concludes by calling Pasher a lying prophet. In verses 7-12 we are made privy to the internal struggle of the prophet. He makes a bitter complaint to the Lord laden with pathos.

While he is faithful in his declaration of the word of the Lord, he faces alienation, opposition, and the distress of the message that he is bearing, and all of these things are traumatising him. He faces opponents like Pasher, and the ridicule and reproach of the people. Worse than all of these things, he feels harassed by the Lord, forced into an intolerable situation, helpless to withstand the Lord's power or command.

If he speaks, he is resisted by the people, sometimes even violently. If he tries to keep silent, the word of the Lord is within him like a burning fire that is trapped, insisting on getting out. He cannot hold it in.

He has declared that Pasher will be called terror on every side, yet he is so afflicted himself in verse 10. Jeremiah faces conspiracies, slander, denunciation, false accusation, even from his closest friends. All are besieging him round about, waiting for their moment to pounce.

His will and his resolve faltering, Jeremiah is revived as he confidently declares that the Lord is with him. Once again, these words look back to the beginning of the book. In chapter 1 verses 7-8, But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. And then in verses 17-19 of that chapter, But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them.

And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Jeremiah compares the Lord here to a warrior by his side.

He petitions the Lord to show his vengeance upon his enemies. And a key word in this part of the passage, as Walter Brueggemann notes, is overcome. Jeremiah recognises that one or the other must prevail.

Only if the Lord is with him will he succeed against his many adversaries. Verse 13 takes the movement from complaint, to trust in the Lord, to petition for his help, to the fitting conclusion of praise for his response. There is a jarring change of tone in verses 14 to 18 that end the chapter though.

Some commentators suggest that what would have been the first edition of the book of Jeremiah might end in this chapter. This section of the book of Jeremiah began with a reference to Jeremiah prior to his birth in chapter 1 verse 5. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. As Lumbombe notes, this conclusion of this chapter returns us to this theme, albeit with a bitter twist.

It's similar to the complaint of Job in Job chapter 3. Verses 1 to 12 of that chapter read, After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, A man is conceived. Let that day be darkness.

May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it.

Let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night, let thick darkness seize it. Let it not rejoice among the days of the year.

Let it not come in to the number of the months. Behold, let that night be barren. Let no joyful cry enter it.

Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark. Let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning.

Because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breaths that I should nurse? Parallels between Jeremiah and Job should not be hard to see. In both cases the Lord acts almost as their adversary.

They are associated with weeping, suffering, calls for justice from the Lord, and deep distress. Both of them are ostracized, accused as troublemakers of their people, and their closest friends turn upon them. Both of them have the difficult task of remaining faithful, even in the face of the devastating silence of the heavens.

Jeremiah in chapter 15 verse 10 had already expressed woe in the context of his birth. Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land. I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me.

Here he goes far further. He doesn't curse the Lord or curse his father and mother, but he curses the day of his birth and the man who declared it. The curse upon the man who declared his birth is an elaborate one.

His fate should be like that of the cities of the plain, because the infant Jeremiah was not killed while he was yet in the womb. Jeremiah believes that his days are doomed to misery, sorrow, and shame. A question to consider.

Why do you believe that the Lord burdens his prophet Jeremiah with so much distress, sorrow, and suffering? 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 18 to chapter 5 verse 13. Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power.

For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant.

Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit, and as if present I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.

Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote to you in my letter not

to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler, not even to eat with such a one.

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you. Paul is sending on Timothy to the Corinthians as his faithful son to remind them of his ways in Christ.

And Paul ends chapter 4 by warning those in Corinth who are puffed up, as if Paul wasn't coming to visit and test them. However he will visit them soon, if the Lord wills. At that point it will become clear whether the troublemakers in Corinth are more than just pompous talk.

The substance, or as it seems more likely the lack of substance, of the puffed up troublemakers will soon be made manifest. They are full of pompous talk of elevated spirituality. But the kingdom of God isn't about fine yet empty talk.

It's about power, about efficacy, about what is actually carried out. These Corinthian troublemakers are like a product that promises the most dramatic effects and transformations on the packaging, in the most extreme and hyperbolic language. However the packaging isn't the point.

What matters is what effect the product actually has when it's taken. They have a choice at this point. Will Paul have to come with a serious rebuke and judgment to them? Or will they take his warning, deal with the issues, and receive a visit from a gentle and loving Paul? Word has gotten around of an especially egregious sin among the Corinthians.

A man is having relations with his father's wife, presumably his stepmother. This is an ongoing situation too. It's not just a past sin.

It's the sort of thing that would be scandalous even among Gentiles. And far from mourning this sin in their midst, the Corinthians remain complacent and arrogant. They're proudly confident in their superior spirituality.

They still see themselves as reigning like kings and being rich, even as this grave wickedness is being practised in their midst. Such an offender must be removed. Paul, while he is physically absent from the Corinthians, is present in the Spirit.

Anthony Thistleton makes a strong case that it is the Holy Spirit rather than Paul's human spirit that is in view here. Paul and the Corinthians share the same one Spirit of God and by that Holy Spirit Paul is present to them. As present in such a manner, Paul has already pronounced judgement upon the man, and the Corinthians need officially to

assemble together as the Church, gathering in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and formally to deliver this offender over to Satan, with Paul participating in their judgement by that one Spirit.

This is to the end that that which is fleshly might be destroyed, and that which is spiritual might be saved. Delivering him to Satan is formal excommunication. It removes the man from the protective realm of the Church, the protected realm of Christ's Kingdom.

It declares that such a man belongs outside, is one excluded, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. True excommunication is an application of the keys of the Kingdom, and the keys of the Kingdom are the powerful word of Christ that is entrusted to the Church. This isn't a blank cheque of authority that is written out to the Church.

Rather it is the task of proclamation of Christ's judgement that is entrusted to the Church as his stewards. This is something that the Church has a duty to perform in instances like this. When flagrant sin is committed, the Church is responsible to proclaim Christ's word of condemnation, not creating a condemnation of its own, but delivering Christ's judgement.

And they need to act, as Paul emphasises here, in the name and the authority of Jesus Christ. What is fleshly clearly refers to the man, but probably not merely to him. It refers to the fleshly character of the Corinthian Church in general.

They need to deal with that as a matter of urgency. Likewise, the salvation of the spirit is not necessarily referring to the man. Although excommunication can have a chastening effect that humbles sinners and brings them to repentance, the sinner may not be the chief person in mind here.

It could refer to the spiritual life of the Church which would be seriously threatened if the offender was permitted to remain in it. All of this is done in anticipation of the Day of the Lord. The excommunication of the Church is a temporal and anticipatory judgement by which the Church formally and faithfully proclaims Christ's condemnation of the impenitent sinner, in order that the holiness of the world be preserved and the sinner brought to repentance.

Paul teaches something similar about anticipatory judgement later in the Epistle in relation to the Supper in 11.28-32. One of the purposes of Church discipline is to prepare us to stand before Christ at the final judgement. As we confess our sins, repent and seek absolution, we keep short accounts with God. We ready ourselves in this way for that great day.

Every week we present ourselves before the Lord, rehearsing for the final judgement. An

excommunication excludes someone from the Assembly, proclaiming their standing before God, or lack of standing, something that is evidenced by their behaviour and their impenitence. Some have seen 2 Corinthians 2 verses 5-11 as referring to the restoration of the sinner mentioned in this passage.

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you. For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough. So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive.

Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs. Paul wants the Corinthians to be clear. In the Church, no man is an island.

The unaddressed sin of one man compromises the entire congregation. Paul's thinking here is deeply rooted in the Old Testament teaching. When a man like Achan sinned, even secretly, the entire congregation could suffer as a result.

When an egregious sin was committed and the congregation failed to punish it, the whole congregation would face the judgment. Sin is contagious, and its guilt is something that can lie upon everyone when it is not dealt with. Communities need to deal with sin in their midst, with the utmost seriousness.

Leviticus chapter 20 verses 2-5 expresses some of this. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name. And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his clan, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

In this chapter Paul uses the example of leaven. This recalls the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. Leaven is something small that when introduced can change the character of the whole lump of dough into which it is placed.

The cutting off of the leaven of Egypt represented the cutting off of the old principle of life that Israel had followed in that land. Jesus elsewhere uses leaven to illustrate the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees. It's their tradition that's passed on from one generation of scribes and Pharisees to the next.

And each generation has that culture, that way of life, that principle of behaviour that

they have inherited from those who went before. And this poisonous principle keeps perpetuating itself. That is why the leaven must be cut off.

Now there is a new cutting off that must take place. Christ is our Passover lamb and we are part of a new Exodus event. In the Gospels Christ is spoken of as the Lamb of God in chapter 1 verse 29 of John.

He is the one who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one who was crucified when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed. Like the Passover lamb none of his bones were broken.

Just as the Passover lamb was part of the deliverance of Egypt, so Christ our Passover lamb is the one by whom we were redeemed from this new Egypt, delivered from the clutches of the Pharaoh of sin. To participate in this new Passover and enjoy this new Exodus however, we must utterly cut off the old patterns of life and start anew. The old leaven is the leaven of malice and evil.

It spreads that principle in our lives and in the lives of our communities so that it ends up working its way out into everything that we do. This is the leaven of the flesh. Rather than living according to this leaven, we must purge it out and act in sincerity or purity and truth.

This is clearly not Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as he references another letter here, one in which he instructed them not to associate with sexually immoral persons. Here he makes clear what he meant by that. Not sexually immoral people in the world but those who purport to belong to the church.

A task of judgment is committed to the church and it is essential that it separates from any who are characterized by such wickedness to the extent of not even eating with them. Those in the world are left to God's judgment but the church must exercise judgment in its own house. Paul concludes with an allusion to a repeated expression in Deuteronomy used for sins committed that involve complete expulsion or the death penalty.

Purge the evil person from among you. Deuteronomy emphasizes the same principle as Paul does here. By their very presence in the assembly, the evil person corrupts and their guilt is contagious.

If the congregation does not deal directly with the evil person, they will all suffer as a result. Paul lists six sins in verse 11, sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness and swindling. Brian Rosner argues that these correspond with the six passages in Deuteronomy that call for the death penalty, passages that are followed by the same expression as Paul uses in verse 13.

Richard Hayes notes that Paul doesn't say that, just as God told Israel to drive out the

evil person, so you should do. Rather he simply directly applies the Old Testament command on this point to the church, as a word that is addressed to them every bit as much as Israel. While these commands are not being fulfilled with the death penalty, the church's practice of excommunication has a similar force within its life.

A question to consider. Within this chapter we see various indications and expressions of the profound union enjoyed by God's people, along with exhortations to protect it from corruption. What are some of the ways in which the fact of such a union transforms the way we think about Christian behaviour and about ethics more generally?