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September 30th: 2 Chronicles 16 & James 4

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Asa's disappointing end. Humble yourself before God.

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

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Transcript

2 Chronicles 16 1 Go, break your covenant with Beasha king of Israel, that he may withdraw from me. 2 And Ben-Hadad listened to king Asa, and sent the commanders of his armies against the cities of Israel. 3 And they conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel-Mayim, and all the store cities of Naphtali.

4 And when Beasha heard of it, he stopped building Ramah, and let his work cease. 5 Then king Asa took all Judah, and they carried away the stones of Ramah and its timber, with which Beasha had been building. And with them he built Geba and Mizpah.

At that time, Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him, Because you relied on the king of Syria, and did not rely on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you. Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army, with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on the Lord, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give

strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.

You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars. Then Asa was angry with the seer, and put him in the stocks in prison, for he was in a rage with him because of this. And Asa inflicted cruelties upon some of the people at the same time.

The Acts of Asa, from first to last, are written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. In the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians.

And Asa slept with his fathers, dying in the forty-first year of his reign. They buried him in the tomb that he had cut for himself in the city of David. They laid him on a bier that had been filled with various kinds of spices prepared by the perfumer's art.

And they made a very great fire in his honour. The majority of Asa's reign is one of faithfulness to the Lord, but in 2 Chronicles chapter 16 we discover that tragically he did not end well. Judah enjoys rest for the first ten years of Asa's reign, which is followed later on by the attack of Zerah and the Ethiopians.

In the fifteenth year he undertakes reformation of the nation, removing idols, and leading the people in renewing covenant with the Lord. Then, according to chapter 15 verse 19, there is rest until the thirty-fifth year of his reign. This takes us to the beginning of chapter 16 and the thirty-sixth year of his reign.

From this point Asa is embroiled in war once more. For the early part of Asa's reign, following the crushing defeat of Jeroboam by his father Abijah, Israel had been mostly in political disarray. Jeroboam's son Nadab only ruled for a few years, after which Beasha displaced Jeroboam's dynasty and came to the throne.

Over the course of Asa's reign, Israel would have four different dynasties on its throne. There are immediate chronological challenges here. Beasha comes up against Asa in the thirty-sixth year of Asa's reign, according to verse 1. However, if we've been keeping mental track of the years of the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel, there are apparent discrepancies here.

Judah has Jeroboam for seventeen years, followed by Abijah for three, followed by Asa. Israel has Jeroboam for twenty-two years, followed by Nadab for two, followed by Beasha for twenty-four. Beasha comes to the throne of Israel in the third year of Asa's reign, according to 1 Kings chapter 15 verse 33.

This means that Beasha would long have been dead in the thirty-sixth year of Asa. 1 Kings chapter 16 verse 8 tells us that Elah, Beasha's son, came to the throne in the twenty-sixth year of Asa. Some scholars, such as Edwin Teeler, trying to harmonise these details, propose that we date the thirty-six years from the beginning of the split of the

kingdom.

This would place these events around the sixteenth year of Asa's forty-one year reign, well within the reign of Beasha, but only one year after his covenant renewal. There are further complicating considerations. Elsewhere in the books of Chronicles, the expression concern never seems to be used with reference to the initial split of the kingdom.

In 1 Kings chapter 15 verse 32, we are told that there was war between Israel and Judah all the days of Beasha and Asa, although it seems to have been largely a cold war. Yet 2 Chronicles chapter 14 verse 1 tells us that there were ten years of rest during Asa's reign. And 2 Chronicles chapter 15 verse 10 speaks of the covenant renewal of Judah in the fifteenth year, which led to peace until the thirty-fifth year of Asa's reign.

There is also the spirit of the text to consider. 2 Chronicles presents Asa as a faithful king, whose rule ended poorly. Yet if the condemnation of Hinnai-nithesea comes around the sixteenth year, it seems to conflict both with the text's presentation of Asa, and leaves us wondering why the reign of Asa is so associated with peace, if much of its time was devoted to war.

It would also present the foot disease that Asa suffers, seemingly in consequence of his sin, well over a decade after the offence that caused it. Others, such as Richard Pratt, suggest a transmission issue. There was a confusion of a twenty and thirty, or a ten and a thirty.

W.F. Albright suggests that we need to lop about a decade off the reign of Rehoboam, which causes problems elsewhere. Raymond Dillard lays out the problems that we face here very well in his commentary on the book. Considering the chronology of events, we should also note that the events described would likely have taken a considerable amount of time.

Bayasha goes up to build Ramah. Then Asa, hearing of this, gathers money and sends delegates to Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria. Ben-Hadad determines to fight against Judah, and then defeats several cities.

Bayasha abandons his building project and moves his forces up north. Then Asa and his men carry away all of the stones and timber of Ramah, and build two cities of their own. Perhaps the timing relates not to the first action of Bayasha, but to the coming of Hanani, which might have occurred over a decade into Judah's support of the Syrians against the Israelites.

Whatever we do with these complex chronological questions, we should recognize the strategic concerns and interests of the parties involved. After the covenant renewal of Asa's fifteenth year, Bayasha is hemorrhaging people to Judah, worshippers of the Lord that are turning to join Asa. The building of Ramah is an attempt to prevent this flow, to

ensure that Judah makes no further gains among his people and in his territory.

He also needs to re-establish Israel's rule over land that has previously been lost to Abijah. Asa, on his part, wants to open up another front against Bayasha, to draw Israel's forces away from his own borders. Consequently, he turns to the Syrians.

Rather than seeking the Lord, Asa seeks out the Arameans. Rather than praying towards the temple, Asa takes treasure from the temple to pay off the Syrians, to break their alliance with Israel and to attack Israel in the north. He had formerly dedicated these treasures to the Lord, in chapter 15, verse 18, and now he is taking from the Lord what he has formerly given to the Lord.

He is turning to the Gentiles to fight against his brothers. Indeed, Israel are a people that will one day be restored to the house of David. He is empowering a treacherous and dangerous force in the north against his brothers.

After the defeat of Zerah, the Ethiopian, Azariah, the son of Oded, had visited him, encouraging him and leading him to his reforms of the nation. Now he is visited by another prophet, Hanani the Seer. Hanani condemns Asa for his dependence upon the Gentiles over the Lord.

The Lord had already helped Asa to defeat the huge army of the Ethiopians and the Libyans. Why could he not depend upon the Lord to help him against the Israelites? Asa's response was very disappointing. He responded by striking out against the messenger of the Lord, putting Hanani in prison.

He also becomes cruel to his own people. One of the great dangers for the king was always that of treating the people as if they were his personal possession, as if the land was his personal possession also, rather than the people and the land of the Lord, whom he had to guard as the servant of the Lord. Asa's failures in this regard might remind us of the failures of former people of the House of David, David himself and Solomon.

Like a number of key figures in the Davidic line, Asa does not end as he began. He gets a diseased foot and even in that situation he only seeks the physicians, without seeking the Lord. Like other kings before him, he trusts in human ingenuity and skill and cunning, but does not truly seek the Lord to grant all such endeavors success.

A question to consider, what cautionary lessons might we learn from Asa and other kings of the Davidic line who did not end as they began? James chapter 4 To spend it on your passions, you adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says, he yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.

But he gives more grace, therefore it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the

humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

James has previously spoken of the conflicts that arise in communities through jealousy and selfish ambition. And now in chapter four he develops this and other themes. Some communities are distinguished by factions and antagonisms and James wants us to think about why this might be.

What is ultimately causing this? He traces it back to the passions that are at war within and gaining control over his heroes. The statements in verse two can be understood in different ways. Maybe they are separate statements of the kind, you desire and do not have, you murder and covet and cannot obtain, you fight and quarrel.

Or as the ESV puts it, which I think is right, you desire and do not have, so you murder, you covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. What he's doing, I think, is describing the same thing as he does in chapter one verse fifteen. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

The point that he's making is that this is the natural life cycle of desire. Sinful desires and passions unarrested lead to quarrels and fights, and those when fully grown lead to murder. This is similar to the teaching that Jesus gives in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 26 in the Sermon on the Mount.

And whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of fire. The point that Jesus is making here is similar to the point that James makes. Desire has a life cycle, and you

need to arrest it before it grows.

We might also think here of the way that God challenges Cain when his face falls and he is angry as a result of the fact that his sacrifice has been rejected while his brother Abel's has been accepted. Sin is crouching at the door, and unless he masters his anger and deals with that right away, it will become full grown and it will become something that he cannot control. What underlies their frustrated desires? They fail to ask properly.

Even when they are praying, they are driven by their passions. Jesus has promised to answer requests in Matthew chapter 7 verses 7 to 11. Once again, we should observe the importance of the Sermon on the Mount for reading James.

Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? God answers prayers, but he gives good gifts, not those things that merely feed our unruly desires. However, because of people's wayward desires, they are experiencing frustration of those desires, which are then being aggravated into conflicts.

James is a very perceptive observer of human nature, and he has a pastoral eye for such things. He challenges his hearers for their misplaced or divided affections. They are adulterous, giving their hearts and favours to others, seemingly not appreciating that this sets them at enmity with God.

They are playing the harlot, as the Old Testament prophets describe Israel. By being friends of the world, being absorbed and preoccupied with earthly things, they are committing adultery against God. God is a jealous God, the quotation in verse 5, the source of which is not entirely clear, could be read in a number of different ways.

For instance, the spirit might be the human spirit, or it might be the Holy Spirit. It might, as some have suggested, be a reference to the tendency of the human spirit that God has given to sinful jealousy, if it is not held back. The yearning may be that of the spirit, or it may be the yearning of God himself.

I take this as a reference to the holy jealousy of God, spoken of in the Ten Commandments themselves. God is a jealous God, and his jealousy is expressed in the Holy Spirit that he has given us, the means by which we are united to Christ as his bride. However, James argues, God gives more grace.

He is a jealous God, but he gives the grace that we need. While the proud face

resistance and rejection, the humble receive grace from God to sustain them, and to enable them to respond to God aright. Verses 7-10 speak of the posture that we should take towards God, recognising the waywardness, the fickleness, and the dividedness of our hearts.

We should humbly draw near to God, seeking the grace that we need. We should mourn our sins, we should resist the devil, and place ourselves beneath God's instruction and his hand. We must seek God to purify our divided hearts, so that we will seek him alone.

And as we humble ourselves and seek God, we may start to find that our prayers are being answered for our good, and our wayward desires that once so unsettled us, are gradually being overcome by his grace. Once again he gives a warning about speech and judgement in verses 11-12. This picks up themes of the beginning of chapter 3. It's almost reminiscent of some of Jesus' warnings about judgement in the Sermon on the Mount again.

Speaking against, as James speaks about it here, could refer to a number of different things, to slandering, to false accusations, to challenging of legitimate authority, and other such things. He makes a peculiar and surprising claim. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law, and judges the law.

Similar issues were tackled by Jesus in Matthew 7-1-2. Judge not, that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. There are tasks of discernment which we are called to perform.

However true judgement belongs to God alone, the one who assumes the status of a judge over his neighbour, in condemning him, usurps the place of the law, and also of God. In the process that person ends up placing themselves over the law, and breaking the golden rule. True wisdom is very careful and humble in the task of discernment and judgement.

It recognises the place of God's judgement over it. It only judges as it stands under God as judge. James now moves to discuss the presumptuous arrogance of people who act without regard to God's providence.

Just as with judgement, there are clearly times when making plans is appropriate and necessary, but we must be entirely clear that we do so as frail creatures standing under the providence of God, without the control of or knowledge of the future that he possesses. We are like a mist or a puff of smoke. This might be similar to the points that Ecclesiastes makes as he speaks about Hebel, or vapour, a word often translated vanity.

The idea of mist or vapour captures something of the transitory character of life and the way that it eludes our control. We should register the fact of God's providence in our

speech, recognising that we stand under it. When we fail to do this we are simply boasting in our arrogance in an evil manner.

In many ways this is the obverse of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, verses 25-34, once again part of the Sermon on the Mount. And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself, sufficient for the day is its own trouble. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents God's providence in response to the anxiety of the poor and the needy, who feel their lack of control over the future.

In his epistle, James presents God's providence in response to the arrogance of the rich and the self-confident, who feel very much that they are in control of the future. Whether we are anxious or arrogant, we should realize the providence of God, and the way that it stands over all of our plans and concerns. Now that we, as James' hearers, know this to be the right thing, he wants us to know that if we fail to do it, we are sinning.

Once again, he is concerned that hearing is transformed into doing, that words are metabolized into actions. A question to consider. At the heart of much of James' teaching in this chapter is the importance of humbling ourselves before God.

How would such humbling of ourselves relieve the conflicts, antagonisms and aggravations with which the chapter begins?