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December 7th: Psalms 92 & 93 & Acts 28:16-31

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The depths of the thoughts of the Lord. Paul in Rome.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 92, a Psalm, a song for the Sabbath. It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High, to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work, at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

How great are your works, O Lord! Your thoughts are very deep. The stupid man cannot know, the fool cannot understand this, that though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever. But you, O Lord, are on high forever, for behold your enemies, O Lord, for behold your enemies shall perish, all evildoers shall be scattered.

But you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox, you have poured over me fresh oil, my eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies, my ears have heard the doom of my evil

assailants. The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon, they are planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age, they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright, he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Psalms 92 is unique in the Masoretic text of the Psalter in being dedicated to the Sabbath, presumably for use in its worship. Indeed, it is the only reference to the Sabbath within the Psalter. Marvin Tate, however, notes that seven Psalms are associated with the Sabbath in the Greek texts.

John Goldengate suggests that part of the reason for this might be the shifting context of worship from the temple, where worship is less focused on the weekly Sabbath, to the synagogue. It is mostly composed like a song of thanksgiving, with instruction concerning the wicked and the righteous internal to it in verses 6-7 and 12-15, instruction that has the character of wisdom literature. Various proposals for the division of the Psalm have been advanced.

Beth Tanner divides it into three stanzas, verses 1-5, verses 6-11 and verses 12-15, a similar order to that adopted by Conrad Schaeffer. Alan Ross divides it into two parts, verses 1-7 and 8-15. Tate, following R.M. Davidson, argues for the importance of a sevenfold chiasmic or concentric structure for the ordering of the Psalm, centring it on verse 8. According to this ordering, the first section in verses 1-3 is paralleled with verses 12-15, verses 4-6 with verses 10-11, verse 7 with verse 9 and then at the centre is verse 8. Schaeffer is another one who observes the central elements of this chiasmic structure.

The psalmist begins by expressing that it is fitting and also attractive to give thanks to the Lord. This is something that is expressed through singing and making music. These things elevate words in beauty.

Musical instruments glorify song, as we see in the lute and the harp and the lyre here. Although we are not given the music that accompanied the Psalms, the music is not incidental. The music, both of the song and the instruments that accompanied it, expressed the joy of the heart and the glory and the beauty of the words and the one about whom they are expressed.

Music has the power to unite the body, in the playing of instruments, in dancing, in exciting the emotions, in bringing the heart to the surface. It also has the capacity to unite a congregation. People sing together.

Music can coordinate people in their labours. In scripture we see examples of musical instruments being played to assist a prophet in prophesying or in order to remove the influence of a troubling spirit. Music moves people and it is important to have appropriate music as part of our worship.

The Psalmist says that he will declare God's steadfast love in the morning and his faithfulness by night. Worship is about proclaiming God's attributes, recounting his marvellous deeds. Doing so in the morning and the night expresses this as a continuous action.

This is not something that just happens at one point. It is something that pervades the whole of his days. Verse 5 is a declaration of how great God's works were and the great wisdom that is manifestly behind them.

We don't know what these works were, but within them the Psalmist sees something of the glory of the mind of the Lord. The Christian hearing this might think of Paul's expression of such praise in Romans 11, verses 33-36. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory for ever. Amen. In contrast to the depths of the Lord's knowledge is the folly and futility of man and his thoughts.

Man cannot understand the truth, which is the fleeting nature of the wicked's prosperity. The fool thinks that the flourishing of evildoers is something that will endure. We might be reminded here of Psalm 93, where the wicked mock God, questioning whether he has knowledge, dismaying the Psalmist, until he recognises the truth about the fact that the wicked will quickly perish.

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places, you make them fall to ruin.

How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself you despise them as phantoms. The evildoers flourish like grass, but they are frail like grass and will soon pass away.

The Lord, by contrast, is on high eternally. All of the Lord's enemies will be scattered and perish. But he raises up his faithful servants, whose ascending power is compared to the untamed strength of the wild ox raising its horn.

The righteous man is anointed with fresh oil, or perhaps covered in oil in celebration. In verse 12, perhaps in reference to the great works he praises in verse 5, the Psalmist speaks of seeing the doom and the downfall of his enemies. He might once have wondered, like the Psalmist in Psalm 73, whether their flourishing would endure, but they are soon brought down, and the Lord's power and his providence and his wisdom is seen in the process.

The righteous, by contrast, are compared not to grass, but to a palm tree or a cedar, the palm tree presumably for its fruitfulness and the cedar for its mighty height and strength. We see similar comparisons in Psalm 1 verse 3. He is like a tree, planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

The temple was a place of cedars, with representations of palms as well, symbolizing, among other things, the righteous who will be planted and flourish there, never withering, but retaining a youthful vigour to their later years. The final verse returns us to the beginning, which spoke about declaring the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness. Now we hear the Psalmist say he will declare that the Lord is upright, he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Seeing the Lord bring the downfall of the wicked, and establishing the righteous, he sees the wisdom of God's providence, and the justice and certainty of his judgment. Psalm 93 The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty. The Lord is robed, he has put on strength as his belt.

Yes, the world is established, it shall never be moved. Your throne is established from of old, you are from everlasting. The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice, the floods lift up their roaring.

Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty. Your decrees are very trustworthy. Holiness befits your house, O Lord, for evermore.

Psalm 93 is a short psalm of enthronement about the reign of the Lord, perhaps to be sung at a particular festival. The Lord's sovereignty is firmly established and enduring. The psalmist both speaks about God in the third person, in verses 1 and 4, and addresses him directly in verses 2-3 and 5. Conrad Schaeffer underlines some of the aspects of divine sovereignty that the psalm brings into view.

He writes, The poet of Psalm 93 acclaims the eternal sovereign, verse 1, the stability of the world and God's throne, verse 2, God's effective rule over rebellious chaos, verses 3-4, and the permanence of God's rule and the lasting holiness of His house, verse 5. He begins by declaring God's reign as king, speaking in more detail of various of his attributes. The Lord is majestically robed, His authority and regal glory on open display. He is also girded for action, with strength as a belt.

His sovereignty is expressed in the majesty of a throne, but also in the effectiveness of action against his enemies. The world and its physical and moral order is firmly established beyond shaking, because God's own throne is established, and God is from eternity. The world and its order is suspended upon God's sovereignty and providence.

We can have security in it, because God is unchanging. Knowing that God is unshakeable assures us that our lives are not in the hand of capricious, unchangeable and fickle forces, but held in the sure grasp of a loving and good creator, who does not alter or shift with the seasons. From this description of God's sovereignty, the psalmist moves to the forces of chaos, here described as floods.

We might think here of great untamed powers, like those of the deep at the beginning of creation. God demonstrates his power over these forces of chaos and disorder. Behind this we might also see the events of the Red Sea Crossing, which enacts this sovereignty over the forces of chaos, both as nations and as natural forces in history.

John Goldingay notes Isaiah chapter 17 verses 12-13 here. In verse 5, the psalmist concludes by speaking about the trustworthiness of God's decrees. The psalms end with a declaration about God's holiness.

In his holiness God is set apart from sinful and frail creatures. This also relates to his integrity and truth, the fact that he is reliable and unchanging, thoroughly and unceasingly consistent to himself. A question to consider.

What are some other examples of the use of such sea imagery in the Psalms? Acts chapter 28 verses 16-31. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him. After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.

And they said to him, We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against. When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement.

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, Go to this

people and say, You will indeed hear, but never understand, and you will indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.

Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness and without hindrance.

It is the end of Acts chapter 24. Paul has finally reached his destination of Rome, where he is under house arrest awaiting his trial. Luke, who has accompanied Paul on his journey, leaves off his telling of Paul's story rather inconclusively.

We don't discover the outcome of his trial. However the themes of the book of Acts are given some degree of recapitulation and receive some resolution in this chapter, while leaving the story of the church, which continues far beyond its pages, still open ended. In Rome Paul is granted a high degree of liberty, especially considering the fact that he is a prisoner.

He is permitted to live by himself, presumably in rented accommodation in an apartment building, perhaps supported at the beginning by some local Christians. He only has one soldier guarding him. Julius, the centurion to whose charge Paul was delivered, and who accompanied him on his journey, was favourably disposed to him before they left, and the journey must have impressed upon him much further that Paul was a divinely gifted and pious man, a man of good will who could be trusted.

He had saved Paul's life and had seen fulfilment of Paul's prophecies and Paul's healings on Malta. Perhaps in part due to his influence, Paul is consequently quite trusted, to the point that he is able to have large numbers of visitors at a given time in his accommodation. He was presumably also able to write.

Many scholars have dated letters like Philemon and Philippians to this period, although the dating of Paul's prison letters depends greatly upon the location from which they were sent, and considerations such as the likelihood or unlikelihood of Onesimus fleeing to Rome. There are many advocates of the claim that they were sent from Ephesus. Paul invites the local leaders to meet him after only three days.

He is presumably regarded as a leader of the Nazarene sect, so they would be quite interested to have an audience with him to hear what he and his movement were all about. Krakena describes the large Jewish community of Rome. Most Jews lived on the other side of the Tiber from the centre of Rome, and the Jewish population of Rome, a city of about one million, was likely between twenty and fifty thousand.

Earlier in Acts chapter 18, Luke had mentioned that Priscilla and Aquila had left Rome after the expulsion under Claudius. Many scholars have speculated that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome had to do with this early Christian movement and the divisions that it caused among the Jews in the city of Rome. Presumably now, after Claudius' death, the Jewish community is again thriving in the city.

They are mostly a poorer population, although those are range and most of their leaders would have been well educated. Kena suggests the main division with the Jews had occurred earlier, with the Christian community moving into house churches. C.K. Barrett notes that there are eleven synagogues mentioned in the sources.

The Jewish community does not seem to be especially integrated. There isn't a single Jewish leader representing the whole Jews of the city, but a number of independent synagogues with their various leaders. Paul lays out his situation to them.

He is innocent. This is a fact that has been recognised by the Romans and testified to already on three occasions in Luke's account. He is not opposed to the Jewish people, to the law or to their customs.

However, the Jewish opposition meant that he needed to appeal to Caesar. His imprisonment arises from his commitment to the truth of the resurrection. This is the truth that is the hope of Israel.

This summarises Paul's earlier speech at his various trials and hearings and brings to a nice, tidy conclusion the story of Paul's defences. He has not done anything worthy of death or condemnation. He has been recognised as innocent by the Romans.

He has walked in good conscience and he is loyal to Israel's God. The Jewish leaders have not yet received any letter from the Judean leaders about Paul. Perhaps letters had been sent but had not yet arrived.

Given the difficulty of Paul's own passage to Rome and the fact that his company tarried as little as possible on the island of Malta, sailing up towards Sicily and Italy at the earliest possible opportunity in the season, it is quite likely that any message that had been sent had yet to arrive. The Jewish leaders, however, are aware of the widespread opposition to the Christian movement and they are curious to hear a leader of the movement explain it. Paul teaches concerning the Kingdom of God.

This is language used over 30 times in Luke's Gospel but only 6 times in the book of Acts, twice within this chapter. It is also used in verse 31. It is similar to the way that the content of Christ's teaching is described.

Paul presents his case, arguing from the law of Moses and from the prophets. The whole scripture testifies that Jesus is the Christ and some of them are in the process of being persuaded but others disbelieve. Tannehill suggests that they were not actually fully

believing, they were in the process of being persuaded but they had not yet committed themselves.

This might help to explain the force of Paul's response that follows. As a community, the Jews make some promising moves in the direction of Paul's message but apart from a few exceptions, they turn away. Paul makes a strong statement against them.

He references the prophecy of Isaiah, taken from Isaiah chapter 6, the chapter of Isaiah's call. There this prophecy precedes a statement of coming judgement in verses 11-13. We can think about Zachariah who was struck deaf and dumb.

Paul was struck blind and then later received his sight at his conversion. Elymas the sorcerer was struck blind. Paul referenced blindness in the context of describing his commission in chapter 26 verses 16-18.

This is not a final rejection of the Jews. A similar sort of scene has occurred in several cities previously. Paul will be rejected by the Jews in one city and he will go to the Jews in the next.

However, this is part of a progressive judgement of blindness falling upon them. We should also appreciate the importance of the quotation from Isaiah at this point. It sums up something of the thrust of the book.

Among other things, we should notice that it alters the quotation. Isaiah reads as follows. Acts, by contrast, reads The book began with Jesus teaching in chapter 1 verse 3. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And it ends with Paul speaking in the same manner. The fate of Paul is not actually given to us in this book. Considering that so much of the book is concerned with Paul, this might seem anticlimactic.

It might seem as if Luke has left us hanging. Very early tradition in 1 Clement chapter 5 verses 5-7, likely written before the end of the first century, suggests that Paul survived this trial. Through envy, Paul too showed by example the prize that is given to patience.

Seven times was he cast into chains. He was banished. He was stoned.

Having become a herald, both in the East and in the West, he obtained the noble renown due to his faith. And having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the West, and having borne witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience. Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, writes in Book 2, chapter 22, Vestus was sent by Nero to be Felix's successor.

Under him Paul, having made his defence, was sent bound to Rome. Aristarchus was with him, whom he also somewhere in his epistles quite naturally calls his fellow prisoner. And Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, brought his history to a close at this point, after stating that Paul spent two whole years at Rome as a prisoner at large, and preached the word of God without restraint.

Thus, after he had made his defence, it is said that the Apostle was sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and that upon coming to the same city a second time, he suffered martyrdom. In this imprisonment he wrote his second epistle, Timothy, in which he mentions his first defence and his impending death. But hear his testimony on these matters.

At my first answer he says, No man stood with me, but all men forsook me. I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge, notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me, that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear, and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. He plainly indicates in these words that on the former occasion, in order that the preaching might be fulfilled by him, he was rescued from the mouth of the lion, referring in this expression to Nero, as is probable on account of the latter's cruelty.

He did not therefore afterward add the similar statement, He will rescue me from the mouth of the lion, for he saw in the same spirit that his end would not be long delayed. Various theories for why Luke ends at this point in the story of Paul have been given. Daryl Barke lists four.

First, that Luke might have planned a third volume. This is highly unlikely. There is very little within this volume that points forward to an expected third.

Second, that Paul was released after two years because his opponents failed to appear as witnesses. Joseph Fitzmyer defends this position. Again, this suggestion seems unlikely.

Third, that Paul died or was martyred, and the outcome was negative or anticlimactic. That again would be surprising. Luke already recounted the martyrdom of Stephen, and it would seem to be quite fitting for him to bring the book to an end with the martyrdom of Paul, who is first introduced to us as a participant in the martyrdom of Stephen.

The fourth suggestion is that the book was about the arrival of the word of Christ to the highest levels of Rome. The eye of the narrative is following Paul on his missions, but the book is not ultimately about him. It is about the continuing work of Christ and the growth of the word of the gospel.

Hence the book ends with the bold preaching of the Kingdom of God in Rome, rather than with the outcome of Paul's trial. The book began with the movement out from

Jerusalem. Fittingly, the book ends in Rome, the heart of the empire.

This movement out is anticipated in chapter 1 verse 8. Paul's arrival in Rome has been anticipated at several points previously as well. Acts chapter 19 verse 21. Now after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.

Acts chapter 23 verse 11. The following night the Lord stood by him and said, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. Acts chapter 27 verses 23 to 24.

For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship. And he said, Do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.

Ending with this quotation from Isaiah also throws our mind back to the ministry of Christ himself. In Luke chapter 8 verses 9 to 10, he also refers to this quotation. And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, The book of Acts begins with the question of what Christ's death and resurrection means for Israel and whether Israel will accept it.

Will the kingdom be restored to Israel at that time? The book relates not just the movement of the gospel out into the wider world, but the Jews' ongoing rejection of the message, anticipating the judgment that will later fall upon Jerusalem in AD 70. Paul still has hearers among the Jews, as we see in these final verses, but for the most part, the people have rejected their Messiah. A question to consider, are there any other prominent themes from the book of Acts that you can see reappearing in this final passage?