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August 29th: 2 Samuel 16 & Colossians 4

August 29, 2020



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Ziba and Shimei. Final messages to the Colossians.

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

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Transcript

2 Samuel 16. When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Zeba the servant of Mephibosheth met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled bearing two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of summer fruits, and a skin of wine. And the king said to Zeba, Why have you brought these? Zeba answered, The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on, the bread and summer fruit are for the young men to eat, and the wine for those who faint in the wilderness to drink.

And the king said, And where is your master's son? Zeba said to the king, Behold, he remains in Jerusalem. For he said, Today the house of Israel will give me back the kingdom of my father. Then the king said to Zeba, Behold, all that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours.

And Zeba said, I pay homage. Let me ever find favor in your sight, my lord the king. 3 When king David came to Bahorim, there came out a man of the family of the house of

Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gerar.

And as he came he cursed continually. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of king David. And all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left.

4 And Shimei said as he cursed, Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! The Lord has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. And the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood.

5 Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head. 6 But the king said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, Curse David, who then shall say, Why have you done so? 7 And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, Behold, my own son seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjaminite? 8 Leave him alone, and let him curse.

9 For the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me, and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today. 10 So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him, and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and flung dust.

11 And the king and all the people who were with him arrived weary at the Jordan, and there he refreshed himself. 12 Now Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, came to Jerusalem, and Hithophel with him. 13 And when Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, Hushai said to Absalom, Long live the king, long live the king! 14 And Absalom said to Hushai, Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go out with your friend? 15 And Hushai said to Absalom, No, for whom the Lord and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen, his I will be, and with him I will remain.

16 And again, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? As I have served your father, so I will serve you. 17 Then Absalom said to Hithophel, Give your counsel, what shall we do? 18 Ahithophel said to Absalom, Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house, and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened. 19 So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.

20 Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the word of God, so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom. 16 In chapter 16 of 2 Samuel, as in the preceding chapter, there is an itinerary of David's departure from the city and his ascent of the Mount of Olives. This itinerary involves a series of meetings and encounters.

Members of his household, groups of his men first, then Zadok and the Ark, Hushai, the Arkite next, and now in chapter 16 he meets Zeba, the lying steward of Mephibosheth, and then Shimei. Both Zeba and Shimei are people associated with Saul. Zeba was Saul's steward, perhaps his chief steward.

We first encountered him back in chapter 9. David and his men are travelling out from Jerusalem in the realm of power, and the persons with whom David had surrounded himself in the past are being removed from him. As he goes further out he meets with men formerly associated with Saul, and there is a sort of reversion to the earlier stage of David's life, where he was pursued by Saul in the wilderness. David is going out into exile, and it is as if layers of his kingdom are being stripped from him at various points on the journey out towards the Jordan.

Zeba gives a great array of gifts to David, similar to the gifts that Abigail had sent to David when he went to attack Nabal. Zeba gives a false report about his master Mephibosheth, seeing an opportunity to gain favour for himself and to ingratiate himself to David. This, we can imagine, would particularly have hurt David.

When David had gone out into exile previously, he had enjoyed the support of Mephibosheth's father, his greatest friend and closest supporter. That the very son of Jonathan had turned against him would be a particularly cruel blow to David, especially after all of the grace that David had shown to Mephibosheth. Zeba, however, as we will find out later, was lying.

He does not seem to accompany David. In all likelihood he returns to the city, where he can play both sides. David arrives at Behorim, which was the point where Paltiel, to whom Michael had been given after she was taken from David, stopped following her when he was weeping after her, back in chapter 3 verse 16.

James Jordan suggests that this is supposed to give us an impression of a boundary of a region of support for Saul. It is important to recognise that the opposition that David faces in the Benjaminite town of Behorim here is not the only reference to the town in the larger narrative. Behorim here is the low point, but in the next appearance of Behorim, in the following chapter, David's loyalists, the sons of the priests, Jonathan and Himiaz, find support there.

As we see Behorim as the low point here, in the next chapter it is the sign of the turning of the tide. Shimei is a man of the family of Saul and he places curses upon David and casts stones at him, accusing him of being a man of bloodshed against the house of Saul. Shimei's accusations are unsurprising and they would seem to have some merit to someone looking from the outside.

The Amalekite who had claimed to have killed Saul had gone to David for a reward. Joab, David's right hand man, had killed Abner in cold blood. Rechab and Beanna, the men

who had assassinated Ish-bosheth, had also come to David for a reward.

David had furthermore put seven sons of Saul to death for Saul's sin against the Gibeonites. To someone who did not know the full reality of what had happened, this all looks exceedingly bad for David, especially with regard to the slaying of Abner. As David has not put away Joab, he is still his right hand man.

Now Abishai, Joab's brother, wants to take the life of Shimei but David restrains him. We might here think of the way that Christ, who had also left Jerusalem and ascended the Mount of Olives, restrained Peter when he wanted to strike with the sword those who came out against Christ to capture him. At the end of this scene, David arrives at the Jordan and he refreshes himself there.

The scene now shifts back to Jerusalem where Absalom and the Israelites, Absalom's supporters to the north, arrive in the city with Hithophel. Huthai, David's counsellor, comes to Absalom and declares his loyalty. Huthai is deceiving Absalom in service of David and this is one of a great many cases of deception in the books of Samuel, most of which are presented in a very positive light.

Deception in such a situation as Huthai was in was quite licit. Absalom was a seditious man and an aggressor who had no right to the truth, which he intended to use to destroy David, the divinely appointed king of Israel. Huthai successfully explains his changed allegiance by suggesting that his allegiance had always been to the kingdom primarily, not just to the man who happened to occupy its throne.

His loyalty was to David the king, not to David the man. No change of allegiance had actually occurred then. Huthai's wisdom is clearly seen in this passage and in what follows.

He shrewdly refrains from answering the question that Absalom poses straightforwardly, but gives a two-part response that resists the implication of his unstable loyalties that is within Absalom's question. He presents himself as a man loyal to the throne and what is more, he flatters Absalom by suggesting that the success of his coup is a sure thing, expressing the absoluteness of his loyalty to Absalom by claiming that Absalom is the one whom the Lord, the men of the court and all of Israel have chosen as their king. David is no longer David the king, but simply David the man, and he is no longer owed any loyalty.

Huthai had been loyal to David when he reigned, but now Absalom had clearly taken David's place, and Huthai would be no less loyal to him. Ahithophel was renowned for the shrewdness of his counsel, and Absalom turns to him for advice regarding what to do. Ahithophel advises Absalom publicly to humiliate his father by openly taking his father's concubines and lying with them.

This would be a sign of his father's emasculation and weakness, among other things. Sleeping with members of the former king's harem was a way of strengthening his claim to the throne. It also made the rebellion more absolute, closing off the possibility of reconciliation between the father and son.

People must take sides. In Genesis 35, verse 22, Reuben had slept with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine, after the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel. This was a power play on Reuben's part.

It asserted his dominance as the firstborn over his father and over Rachel's side of the family, who had always enjoyed Jacob's special favour. Back in chapter 3, Ishbosheth had, likely falsely, accused Abner of going in to Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines. In 1 Kings chapter 2, Adonijah, after his failed coup, requested Abishag the Shunammite, likely again as part of another attempt to gain the kingdom.

All of this recalls David's original sin with Bathsheba too. Ahithophel, who gave the counsel, was Bathsheba's grandfather. The site where Absalom committed the act was the very place from which David had first looked out at Bathsheba.

There is a sort of poetic justice taking place here. David's own sins sowed bitter seeds that are now bearing a very bitter harvest, bringing the consequences back upon David's own head. This all fulfils the judgement of the Lord delivered through Nathan the prophet, back in chapter 12 verses 11-12.

Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbour. And he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun, for you did it secretly. But I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.

A question to consider. How does David's response to Shimei's cursing reveal a righteous response to divine judgement? What might be some of the ways in which we might follow David's example? Colossians chapter 4 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. Tychicus will tell you all about my activities.

He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. And with him Anesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, welcome him.

And Jesus, who is called Justice. These are the only men of the circumcision among my

fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you, and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, greets you. As does Demas.

Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, see that you fulfil the ministry that you have received in the Lord.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Paul continues his instructions concerning proper household order at the beginning of chapter 4, before concluding his epistle with requests and greetings. A well-ordered household is a matter that is addressed on several occasions in the New Testament. The church itself is a household, and its members have their own households.

Especially in this stage of the church's history, much of its life would have occurred within the realm of households, with wealthier members hosting a congregation within their house, and supporting its ministers and ministries as patrons. Nympha, in this very chapter, is an example of a woman who hosts a church within her house. When we think of the household, we may think of a domestic realm of retreat from the world of work, study and public life, where we recharge ourselves and enjoy the company of our immediate family.

It's a realm primarily of recreation. However, in the world within which Paul is writing, the household was a very great deal more than that. Our own society is more of a historical outlier in this respect.

The household was far more integral to society, a centre of labour, business and government. The household was its own economy and productive entity, within which its members needed to depend upon good order and collaborative labour in order to survive and thrive. It wasn't the case that the man typically went out to work, while the woman stayed at home as the housewife.

Households weren't narrowly focused on the young nuclear family, but were more extended and intergenerational in their character. Much that occurred in many households would be more analogous to the operations of a medium-sized company today. At points, God's government is understood after the analogy of the management of a household.

God is a father, and his fatherhood in the wider cosmos is analogous to the place of the father within his earthly household. All of this is important to bear in mind when we are

reading these household codes, which have a fair amount in common with some other household codes in the ancient world. Aristotle or Xenophon's teaching on the household, and concerning men and women within it, have many points of similarity with the New Testaments.

We should beware of overstating the differences, even though there most definitely are some differences, in many respects Paul is nearer to that world than he is to ours. When we read about wives submitting to their husbands, for instance, we should keep the form of the household in mind. Within the ancient household, the free man bore a weighty set of responsibilities of provision, protection and judgment, in overseeing the labour and relations of his household.

The submission of his wife is not primarily about giving him the deciding vote in matters of dispute, as some understand it today, but in honouring, upholding and counselling him as she works alongside him in the labour of forming a well-ordered and just household that impacts the wider society. The ideal is that, as she supports him, his realm of influence and weight in the wider society will increase, and as his wise and supportive second-in-command, she will enjoy a growing field for her own labours and level of honour within her community. A wife who is constantly undercutting the authority of her husband in his household, or bringing dishonour to him in their community, is not a good wife.

On the other hand, and this is perhaps where the distinctive emphases of the Christian teaching are most pronounced, a man who does not exercise his authority within his household in a way governed by love, building up and encouraging those within it, is failing in his calling. The formation of the household is a collaborative effort, and the primary locus of both the man and the woman's labour, which is a rather different situation from the modern situation where men and women typically both leave their homes and sell the best part of their labour and its fruits to unrelated persons in order to serve the business enterprises of third parties, rather than labouring in their own households, before returning home to consume some of the money that they have earned at the end of the day and over the weekend. While it may be strange of us to think of it in such a manner, certain aspects of our situation are more analogous to that of high status slaves, and there are analogies to be drawn between the modern business owner and the master of slaves, both of whom might exert considerable power over those who work under them.

Paul does not condemn the owning of slaves. While a slave-owning society is none ideal, much as a society that imprisons people, it is not presented as necessarily sinful within the Old or New Testaments. In both Testaments there are a number of righteous slave-owners.

In neither Testament is there any straightforward condemnation of slavery. The

institution of slavery in the ancient world more generally, and in classical antiquity more particularly, was brutal and oppressive in its general character, although the conditions of slave could vary markedly, and many would have enjoyed materially better conditions than those of poor free persons. Manumission would not have been a step up in the world for many slaves.

For all of its common abuses, it was also more morally complex than the chattel slavery characteristic of the American antebellum South, which was a form of slavery generally ordered around race and man-stealing. That form of slavery, which is very clearly condemned categorically within Scripture, tends to serve as our paradigm for thinking about slavery more generally. It should not do so.

When, as here in verse 1, Paul addresses slave-owners, his concern is not to abolish the institution, but to leaven it by love. Slave-owners need to treat their servants with fairness and with justice. In Ephesians 6, verse 9, masters are charged to stop threatening their servants.

Masters must recognize that they too have a master in heaven. By this reminder, Paul is leavening the institution of slavery by the golden rule. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets, and by Christ's principle of judgment.

For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Masters, you have a master in heaven. Treat your servants accordingly.

Servants are instructed to act towards their earthly masters as those working heartily for the Lord, promised a great inheritance as sons. The truth of Christian freedom and of sonship must guide them. For masters, it is the principle of Christian service that is most pronounced.

They must act towards their servants as those who are themselves bond-servants of Christ, accountable to him, and answerable for how they treat other persons made in God's image. For, as Paul reminds the Ephesians, there is no partiality with God. The status of the slave-owner does not exalt him over others in God's sight, or give him some greater dignity, or allow him to treat others with impunity.

Paul charges the Colossians to continue steadfastly in prayer. Watchfulness and thanksgiving are the order of the day. Watchfulness to the signs of God's work and the needs of the times, and thankfulness for the manifold blessings of God.

Prayer is a constant work of the Church and for Christians, a sustained communication with God in our labours and lives. Paul is especially concerned for the success and the progress of the Gospel mission. He requests their prayer for an open door for the Word.

The Word here is almost personified, as if it were someone seeking to gain access to certain closed realms. The Word must be spread and avenues must be opened for it. However, intercession is an essential part of how such avenues will be opened.

How hearts will be made receptive, how opportunities will be presented, how possibilities will arise. This is all for the sake of declaring the mystery of Christ, of which Paul spoke earlier in the Epistle. Paul is imprisoned on account of this, but, as he argues in 2 Timothy 2, verse 9, the Word of God is not bound.

In Philippians, for instance, Paul speaks of ways in which his imprisonment actually opened unexpected doors for the Gospel. The doors that God will open for His Word may not be the ones that we expect. Paul is a herald of the mystery and it is his task to reveal it, to make it clear.

He asks the Colossians to pray also for this, that he might fulfil his calling in this crucial respect. The Colossians are to be mindful and wise in the ways that they act in the sight of their society. The quality of their lives will be foundational for the success of their witness.

This requires goodness and moral courage, but it also requires wisdom and creativity, as there will be pitfalls and traps and difficult decisions to be made. Faithfulness often requires wisdom, the ability to perceive the best courses of action, to take the right stance and to perceive subtle errors. The Colossians must be especially considerate of how they use their time and how they use their speech.

The verb translated making the best use of here is the same as that which is used in Ephesians 5. In both places, I think that the sense of the verb that some translations capture with the translation redeeming is present, although it is clearer in Ephesians 5, where we are told that they are supposed to do this as the days are evil. In times dominated by wickedness, Christians must not simply maximise the Christian activities within their day planners, but they must resist the ways of thinking of and employing time that surround them, and must establish different patterns and habits and practices. They must relate their time to the coming day of the Lord with watchfulness.

They must punctuate their time with rest and thanksgiving. They must more fully root themselves in God's works in the past, and look with renewed hope to further horizons in the future. They must, in ages of decadence, sacrifice for that future.

They must, in ages of revolution, honour their fathers and mothers. In such ways, they will redeem the time in evil days. Their speech must likewise exhibit wisdom and grace.

It must have the savour of salt, being lively with truth. In a world of insipid error, Christians must bring words that have salience and power, words that stand out. This requires us to learn how to communicate words of truth with eloquence, passion and

integrity.

In societies where words are light, the words of Christians must be weighty. Knowing how to answer each person is a challenge, and we need to grow in wisdom in this area. The words that we speak must vary according to the persons and context that we address.

The wise person must speak considered and measured words in season, not speaking rashly or carelessly. The conclusion of the epistle contains elements familiar from others of Paul's epistles. Travel plans, greetings from various persons, final instructions, personal notes and a benediction.

James Dunne, following Roy Yates, remarks upon the great social mix of the people represented in this chapter. Large householders, nympha, a doctor, Luke, people with sufficient financial freedom or support to travel in the work of the gospel, Tychicus, Mark and Epaphras, and slaves, Onesimus. There are also various descriptions such as fellow worker, minister, brother, fellow servant and fellow prisoner.

Tychicus is bearing the epistle, and he will also bring news of Paul to the Colossians. Paul commends him to them with the intent that he will not only communicate how Paul and the others are doing, but that he will be able to minister to them. Tychicus is accompanied by Onesimus.

This is likely the occasion of the sending of the epistle to Philemon, and all save the names of Philemon and Appia in the epistle to Philemon are also mentioned here. Onesimus is one of them, he is a Colossian, but now he is one of them in a deeper way, as a Christian. Tychicus, who is privy to more of the details, can explain anything that needs further explanation about Onesimus' situation and of what transpired.

Paul sends greetings from six of his fellow workers, three Jews, Aristarchus, Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, and Jesus called Justus, and three Gentiles, Epaphras, Luke and Demas. Aristarchus is described as Paul's fellow prisoner, most likely literally. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, was formerly a cause of division between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15, verses 37-40.

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him, and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

Mark's mother owned a large house in the city of Jerusalem, and this is the first time that we hear of his relationship with Barnabas, although it makes a lot more sense of the details of their connection elsewhere. Now it seems Paul has been reconciled to Mark,

and recognises his value. It isn't clear whether Mark is the author of the second epistle, but the belief that he was has been very widely held throughout church history.

Epaphras is the one who has worked among the Colossians, and in the surrounding region of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Paul might not yet have met the Colossians, but Epaphras has told him all about them, and is in constant prayer for them. Paul also has Luke and Demas with him.

If the Mark mentioned here is the author of the second gospel, then we have reference to two gospel writers being in the same place as Paul, the author of the vast majority of the epistles of the New Testament. Almost 60% of the New Testament was written by these three men. We also learn that Luke was a physician.

Sadly, in 2 Timothy 4, verse 10, we learn the tragic news that Demas later forsook Paul, in love with this present world. Paul wants the Colossians to pass on these greetings to the Christians in Laodicea too, and to Nympha and the church meeting in her house. There is quite a lot of debate over whether Nympha was a woman, or whether the person Paul is speaking of is Nymphas, a man, as the manuscript tradition has both forms within it.

Not much depends upon this point, however. Possibly Paul has yet to visit Laodicea, which is why he can single out Nympha and the church at her house, without fear of privileging her over others in the congregation. Laodicea is, of course, one of the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation.

They are instructed to pass on the epistle to the Laodiceans, from whom it would presumably circulate more widely. They were also to read the letter that the Laodiceans had received, presumably from Paul, which a number of scholars believe is the epistle to the Ephesians. These epistles would be read publicly to the congregations of the churches, and then they would be circulated further, presumably becoming gathered in small volumes quite early on.

They expressed Paul's apostolic authority, and they also knit the young church more closely together, by encouraging lots of movement between congregations with these circulating letters. At this time, then, it is likely that the Colossians would have received the epistle to the Ephesians, the epistle to the Colossians, and the epistle to Philemon. One was directly addressed to them as a church, one was addressed to a particular member of the Colossian church, and the other was passed on from another church nearby.

Archippus, who is also mentioned in the epistle of Philemon, is charged to fulfil the ministry that he has received. We don't know what this was, but perhaps it was some particular role in the church that met at Philemon's house. Paul signs off the letter with his own hand, having presumably used an amanuensis to this point.

He calls upon them to remember his chains. His imprisonment was a mark of his apostolic ministry, and his union with Christ in his sufferings in serving the church. They also highlighted his need for prayer.

He concludes by wishing them God's grace. A question to consider. How might Paul's instructions concerning the use of time and speech remind us of the wisdom books of the Old Testament?