

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 12 JULY 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

This week we continue with our careful examination of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Our reading, when you get to it, will begin with the words, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," the wonderful news of the gospel. Isn't that why we gather in worship – and why, during this time of potential danger, many of us continue with our worship as individuals or as families? Come to this time, then, full of joy, recalling why you are here, and to whom you belong.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

I've had a couple of positive comments about using hymns for our prayers, and no negative ones, so I'm encouraged to keep doing so for a while yet. In our treasury of hymns, we have some wonderful, and often well-loved, expressions of faith. Today's is certainly one such. Last week, our reading from Romans involved the profound description by Paul of the "warfare" raging within him between his desire to do good, and the powerful attraction of the sin that had taken up residence within him. Today's builds on that and resolves the dilemma. And this hymn is precisely about that "spiritual warfare" and proclaims unequivocally who is the victor.

A mighty fortress is our God was, in its German original, the composition of none other than Martin Luther (1483-1546), the great reformer. The hymn is based on Psalm 46, and has been described as "the single most powerful hymn of the Reformation movement", as "the battle cry of the people, a great source of strength and inspiration even for those who were martyred," and as "one of the noblest and most classic examples of Christian hymnody." The first verse is inscribed on Luther's tomb in Wittenberg.¹ The hymn has been translated into virtually every language, and in English there are various versions. The one that we use is by David Arthur Schubert, and appears in Together in Song.

A mighty fortress is our God,
a trusty shield and weapon,
our faithful helper in all need,
no matter what may happen.
The old evil foe
now means deadly woe;
deep guile and great might
are his dread arms in fight;
on earth he has no equal.

With our own might is nothing done;
we'd soon be lost, rejected.
But for us fights the very one
whom God himself elected.
And who may this be?
Christ Jesus is he.
He is our great Lord,
there is no other God;
and he has won the battle.

¹ Kenneth W Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories. The inspiring stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 1982), pp. 14f.

Though hordes of devils gather here,
all eager to devour us,
we tremble not, we do not fear,
they cannot overpower us.
This world's prince may still
scowl fierce as he will,
he does us no harm,
he's judged, he's overcome;
one little word can fell him.

Despite all foes, the Word shall stand
against all their endeavour;
God's gifts and Spirit, close at hand,
shall be with us for ever.
Though they cause distress,
take all we possess,
though they hurt and kill,
we are victorious still;
the Kingdom's ours for ever.

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

As always, you may find this prayer helpful, or choose to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. What is important is that we make our confession.

God our heavenly Father,
You have assured us that, if our hearts are set on righteousness,
you will forgive our stumblings and our failures.
So we come before you once again to confess our sins.
The seed of our sinfulness is buried deep within us;
we answer its call as our second nature.
Like Paul, we know the good we should do,
and we earnestly crave to do it,
but we find ourselves succumbing to our sinful nature.
Sometimes this is through careless inattentiveness,
when we are not on our guard;
sometimes it is by wanton acts of volition, when the attraction is too great.
So we have sinned in thought, and in word, and in deed, and in acts of omission.
But this is not who we want to be; our hearts *are* set on righteousness.
So, in the name of the one in whom we place all our trust,
the blessed Lord Jesus Christ, we ask you to forgive us,
to correct us, and to strengthen us.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

We're about to read Romans 8. The passage begins with these words that are more than assurance – they are words of triumph and jubilation!

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,
because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free
from the law of sin and death.
Thanks be to God!

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 8:1-17 (Lectionary actually concludes at verse 11.)

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalm 119:105-112

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

7 **Prayers for the world and Lord’s Prayer**

Today is “Malala Day”. It is named for Malala Yousafzai, the courageous young Pakistani girl, now woman, shot by the Taliban when she was only 15 years old. Malala had been an activist for women and girls since she was 11 years old, during the time of Taliban occupation of Swat. The Taliban forbade an education to girls. Malala’s family ran a chain of schools, and supported girls being given an education. On a bus, on her way to an examination in 2012, Malala, along with two other girls, was shot by a Taliban gunman, in retaliation for her activism. She recovered sufficiently from her near fatal head wound to be transported to a hospital in Britain, where she was eventually nursed back to health. Undaunted by her ordeal, or by an undertaking by the Taliban to try a second time to kill her as a matter of “religious duty”, she continued (in Britain) with her activism for girls’ education. For this she has been awarded a wide range of national and international honours, the pinnacle of which was her becoming the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (jointly with Kailash Satyarthi) in 2014 at the age of only 17. Malala turns 33 today. On 19 June, she shared the news that she had graduated from Oxford University with a degree in philosophy, politics and economics. Today’s prayer is for Malala, for education, particularly for girls’ education, and for all those girls and women who are oppressed and deprived of their rights in too many places around the world. You may, of course, choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

God our Father,

Today we give you thanks for Malala Yousafzai, for her courage, perseverance and advocacy.

We give thanks that the attempt by men of evil to kill her did not succeed,

that she found sanctuary and healing in the United Kingdom,

that she achieved a full recovery,

and that she has become such an international force for the right of girls to an education.

We pray for her continued success and commitment;

may her cause prosper and grow,

and rain positive results on the many girls who are denied their rights,

including their right to an education.

Bless her, and bless her work; may it become an unstoppable force.

We pray too for all children who are prevented from accessing an education.

There are both boys and girls who are denied this right,

either by deliberate policy, or by circumstances such as dislocation by war or disaster,

or by racism, or simply by the poverty of their parents.

Father, we pray that governments everywhere would champion the cause of education,

the single most effective means for tackling inequality and poverty

and the dangers of ignorance.

We pray for international agencies, and benefactors, who seek to further access to education.

We pray for teachers who toil, often in danger or in great difficulty,

to bring learning to children in areas of such need.

Bless the work of all who seek to address this pervasive problem,
that they may be successful, and turn around the lives of more and more children.
We pray in particular for those girls
who are denied an education simply because they *are* girls.
We are taught to respect the cultures of different peoples,
especially the religions practised by others,
and yet we must cry out against any patriarchal culture that treats women and girls as inferiors.
We pray for the men involved, that they might be released from their own ignorance,
that they might come to understand
the great potential of women and girls to contribute to the world,
that they might see that they, themselves are the poorer for their suppression of women,
while they literally ruin the lives of their hapless victims.
But, however it is resolved, Father, we pray for an end to the evil that denies girls their rights.
We pray for every initiative focused upon addressing this problem –
not that *our* values be inflicted on societies where they don't fit,
but that the basic human rights of all, especially of women and girls,
be recognised and respected.
So we give you thanks for Malala,
we pray for her on her birthday,
and we pray for the causes that she and others champion
on behalf of the girls and women of the world.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:
Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

8 **Conclusion**

Recall the words with which our reading concluded. Could there be any better way to finish?
For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.
The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again;
rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.
And by him we cry, "*Abba, Father.*"
The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

Working your way through Romans, as we've been doing over some weeks now, can be tough. You recall that our passage from chapter 7 last week ended with Paul's plaintive cry, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" This came at the end of his agonising, almost despairing, description of the war going on within him – his desire to serve God, but his inability to do so because of the sin dwelling within him. It was a dilemma to which we can all relate.

Yet, seemingly out of the blue, comes the triumphant note which begins chapter 8:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

This exultant note seems out of keeping with what has come before, and that impression is not helped by its commencing with the word "therefore", as if it all just followed on logically from the previous sentence. What is going on here?

We began our excursus through Romans at chapter 5, and we've been through ups and downs, without doubt. We began with that most wonderful of pronouncements, that we are saved, not by anything which we have done or could possibly do, but by the free gift of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. The ensuing chapters explored what that meant, and we saw that it did *not* mean that we were thus set free to do whatever we wanted, that a response from us was required. We saw that, in fact, having been freed from the shackles of slavery to sin, our response must be willingly to commit ourselves to slavery to righteousness, slavery to God himself, a benevolent master whose service leads to life. Then in chapter 7, Paul bemoaned his own, personal, inability to obey this injunction, his continuing temptation to sinfulness, which he described almost as a malevolent being who had taken up residence within his body, and prevented him doing the good he wanted to.

So chapter 8 brings all these threads together. Without hyperbole, this passage from Roman has been described as,

the inner sanctuary within the cathedral of Christian faith; the tree of life in the midst of the Garden of Eden; the highest peak in a range of mountains.²

Its fundamental message is summed up by one commentator thus:

Sin and law may have been the overwhelming favorites, but victory belongs to "those who are in Jesus Christ." The fires of hope had dwindled to a cold flame when reinforcements finally arrived. Credit for the victory, as irrevocable as it was unexpected, belongs to the Spirit.³

It is in chapter 8 that we learn how God has resolved the apparently fatal conundrum of our being unconditionally forgiven, while at the same time we know that we remain, against our will, beholden to sin. The answer, in short, is through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul has already made clear the inadequacy of the Law. The Law, he has insisted, is good in itself. It is a statement of holiness and righteousness. But the Law only made our sinfulness clear to be seen. Had we been able perfectly to obey the Law, then we would be righteous before God; but that is not our situation. Paul has told us much earlier that sin entered the world through the first man – our sinful nature is a direct inheritance from Adam, who chose the path of disobedience. Sin holds

² Cited by Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1996) p.467, who is in turn cited by Marcin Kowalski, "The Brokerage of the Spirit in Romans 8", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* lxxx (2018), p. 636.

³ James R Edwards, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 197.

sway over us, and all the Law does is to highlight just how enslaved to sin we are. So the mechanism God has chosen to rescue us from this hapless plight, say Paul, is this:

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh

This is the absolute crux of the argument. Sin has been condemned. That does not mean that it has ceased to exist. It remains within our bodies. Paul has already acknowledged that he, as all of us, remains beholden to sin, which causes him to do those things that he would choose not to do. But the death sentence has been pronounced on sin.⁴ The tide has been turned against sin, not by anything we did or could have done, not by any mechanism of the Law, but by the free gift of Jesus, in his sacrificial death, and through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Thus, this great blessing is for all who live “according to the Spirit”; it is not for those who live “according to the flesh”.

“Spirit” and “flesh”. We should be careful here not to succumb to the notion that everything relating to our bodies is sinful because they are flesh and blood, and that therefore, we should live a life of absolute aestheticism and abstinence; indeed that we should hate our bodies. That is *not* the case at all, and it is *not* what Paul is saying. Our bodies are not, in and of themselves, sinful; they are God’s creation, which he declared to be “good”. Our bodily life can be pleasurable because that is God’s design for us. And Paul tells us that Jesus himself came “in the likeness of sinful flesh”. Jesus was, in every sense, a man of flesh and blood, a physical man just as we are, whose body afforded him all the things that are physically enjoyable. The only difference between Jesus’ body and ours was that Jesus’ body had not been invaded by sin. One commentator explains that Paul is, here, harking back to his comments in chapter 5 that sin entered the world through one man, Adam’s, disobedience, but grace entered the world by another man, Jesus Christ (5:12-17). The difference between the “flesh” of Jesus and our own, he suggests, is that Jesus “entered humanity with a nature like Adam’s before the Fall.”⁵ When Paul talks negatively about “the flesh”, he is speaking about our bodies as they have been perverted by the presence of sin residing deep within them. The difference between living “according to the Spirit” and living “according to the flesh” is thus not between some ethereal out of body existence, divorced from all physicality, and living in a body that is inherently rotten and sinful. It is the difference between allowing our lives to be led by the Spirit that God has implanted within us, or following our basest sinful instincts⁶.

How do we know into which category we fall?

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

If you think back to Paul’s agony in chapter 7, he complained, “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” There his “living in the Spirit” is evidenced by his earnest desire to do what is right, and his, albeit unsuccessful, fight against his sinful desires. That is why we can all relate to his agony. We know only too well that sin still resides powerfully within us – but in this chapter of Romans, Paul tells us clearly that, provided we are living in the Spirit – providing that our heartfelt desire is to follow righteousness – then the sin within us has been condemned by the death of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit fights against it on our behalf.

It’s not that the battle is over, as we all know. Rather, our situation has been compared to that in a war when the tide is turning. For example, in 1944, after the D-Day landings and the fall of Paris, the Nazi occupation of France was doomed to eventual defeat, even though the Allied victory still

⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone. Romans* (London, 2014) Part 1, p. 137.

⁵ Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 204; Wright, *op. cit.* pp. 140-1.

lay some time away⁷. In the same way, the fatal blow has been dealt to sin, but sin lingers on within us and will continue to wreak its havoc; nevertheless, its defeat is assured by the victory of Jesus Christ and the ongoing agency of the Holy Spirit. If our allegiance is to righteousness, if we have willingly submitted ourselves as slaves to God, if we have chosen the way that leads to life – that is, if we “live according to the Spirit” – then we are assured of the ultimate victory over sin and death. In a word, we are incapable of pleasing God by obedience to the Law; we please God with our earnest desire to be committed to righteousness. No more is asked of us than that.

But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

You may recall, several weeks back, we thought of Martin Luther’s enthusiasm for Romans chapter 5. The moment he realised the difference between the Law and the Gospel, he said, he “broke through”. It was his “eureka moment”. In the ensuing chapters, Paul has been exploring how that distinction works. How can it be explained that we are, at the same time, saved by our faith, while we seem incapable of resisting sin. Here in chapter 8, at last, is the explanation. God looks past our inability to obey the Law, and looks only to our motivation and intention. If we *choose* to return to our slavery to sin, we are lost; but if our earnest desire and commitment are to righteousness, *that* is taken as obedience.

All along, Paul has presented this as a choice for life over death. But its reward is greater – far greater – than that:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

First, let’s notice this. Previously Paul has spoken of “slavery” to righteousness, that is, slavery to God, as the life-giving alternative to slavery to sin. The word “slavery” can sit uncomfortably, despite the time we spent understanding slavery in the Roman world. But here, Paul explains this new slavery. It is not a slavery that involves fear, but one that involves great privilege. What is that privilege? Nothing less than adoption into the very family of God – “sonship” (and daughtership!). It is the right to address God as “Abba, Father”. It is a gift beyond all imagination, beyond our wildest dreams, beyond any hope we may entertain – but *not* beyond the reality of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ.

It is impossible not to think of the prologue to John’s gospel: “Yet to all who did receive him [Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (1:12) There could be no greater gift. No wonder, then, that Romans chapter 8 has been called “the inner sanctuary within the cathedral of Christian faith”. For here, we are indeed on holy ground.

⁷ Edwards, *op. cit.* p. 200.