

# Proper 18

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September 7, 2003

## Prayer of the Day

Almighty and eternal God, you know our problems and our weaknesses better than we ourselves. In your love and by your power help us in our confusion and, in spite of our weakness, make us firm in faith; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Isaiah 35:4-7a

{4} Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." {5} Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; {6} then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; {7} the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

*4. Say to those who are of a fearful heart:* After hearing Yahweh declare that the wilderness will blossom and be made as beautiful as Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon (verses 1-2) [1], the prophet is instructed to speak words of encouragement to the discouraged exiles.

*vengeance...recompense...he will come to save you:* In Deuteronomy 32:35 Yahweh promised that he would punish the enemies of Israel for taking responsibility for her afflictions. Here, too, relief is promised.

*5-6a. the blind...the deaf...the lame...the speechless:* The blind, the lame, all who are blemished are disabled from approaching Yahweh and his Temple (Leviticus 21:8). Yahweh promises that their handicaps will be reversed.

*6b-7a. waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert...springs of water:* . In the Exodus Yahweh provided water in the wilderness (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:8-11). This experience is the basis for the idea that Yahweh will transform the wilderness from a barren land to a fruitful one. Of course, as the creator it goes without saying that Yahweh is able to turn rivers into a desert, and the desert into pools of water (Psalm 107:33-35).

## Psalm 146

{1} Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! {2} I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. {3} Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. {4} When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. {5} Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, {6} who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; {7} who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; {8} the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. {9} The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. {10} The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

The Psalm responds to the encouragement of the first lesson by praising the Lord who created everything and who protects and provides for the helpless. He reverses the fortunes of the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, and the blind. He acts on behalf of the orphan and widow. He will reign forever, so Israel will always be protected. For this she is called on the "Praise the Lord!"

## James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17

{1} My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? {2} For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, {3} and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," {4} have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? {5} Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? {6} But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? {7} Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? {8} You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." {9} But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. {10} For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. {11} For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. {12} So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. {13} For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.] {14} What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? {15} If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, {16} and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? {17} So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James condemns acts that favor the wealthy and dishonor the poor. The early Christian community was made up of a broad spectrum of people. James is concerned that all who belong to that community are equal in the sight of their co-religionists. Many if not most of the early Christians were very poor, disenfranchised, and politically and religiously suspect. 6. *Is it not the rich who oppress you:* "...as poor people, the members of the Christian community are dependent upon the rich non-Christians and in that position they must endure hardship." [2]

*Is it not they who drag you into court:* Christians are discouraged from taking one another to court (1 Corinthians 6:1-7). Cases of non-Christians taking Christians to court include the owners of a slave girl (Acts 16:19), and the silversmiths of Ephesus (Acts 19:24). Paul violently attacks the practice of Christians using the courts against other Christians (1 Corinthians 6:1-7), so that must have happened too.

7. *Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name:* Christians are not only dishonored by the wealthy because they are poor, but also because of their religious commitment. This suggests that the wealthy James is talking about are not Christians, but he may also have in mind the sort of conflict recorded between Paul and Peter in Antioch.

8. *the royal law..."You shall love your neighbor as yourself.":* Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Galatians 5:14; Romans 13:9. That Christians claimed to be able to love God and not love their brothers and sisters in Christ is the basis for 1 John 4:20-21.

9. *if you show partiality:* Partiality is the opposite of loving a neighbor as one's self, and it is a sin against the whole law, just as loving one's neighbor is the fulfilling of the whole law (Galatians 5:14).

10 *whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it:* The "law" that is in consideration is the "royal law..." "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." To fail to love the neighbor, the Christian brother or sister, in one instance cannot be excused or ameliorated by showing love on another occasion.

11-12: The same God pronounced all of the commandments, and also the "law of liberty." See Galatians 5:13, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

13. *judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy:* This is a

complement to Jesus' words in Luke 6:37: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven"

*mercy triumphs over judgment*: "The correct sense of the statement has already been captured in the Scholion: 'For mercy rescues from punishment those who in purity practice mercy, since at the time of judgment it stands by the royal throne'.... This is the same idea which is expressed also in the paranetic section in Tobit: 'For mercy delivers from death... and for all who practice it mercy is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High... (Tob. 4:10f)....'"

14-17: Dibelius describes James 2:14-26 as "A Treatise on Faith and Works," and says, "A connection between this treatise and the preceding one [2:1-13, 'A Treatise on Partiality'] cannot be established.... Instead, the point of the section is expressed in the introductory rhetorical question in v 14: the section deals with faith and works and the relationship between the two." [3]

14. *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?* "Jas does not say what is intended by the word 'faith'. Hence, he cannot possibly be concerned about a theologically refined concept of faith.... But rather the common meaning of the word 'faith'.... for Jas what counts is that faith which does not declare itself in works cannot save anyone.... The author considers it to be only natural that a man who professes (Christian) faith also 'has works.'" [4]

15-16: James "does not wish to portray faith without works [in this example], but rather to compare faith without works to *an example of goodwill without works*. The common point to which both relate is 'barrenness.'" [5] Those to whom James writes know well enough that words without help are of no use to a person who is naked and starving.

17. *So [likewise] faith by itself...*: As a friendly wish ("Have a good day.") without some action to that end is meaningless, so likewise faith is dead if it is not expressed in action.

Those who drew up the lectionary do not include the next verses in it anywhere. Dibelius says of verse 18, "one of the most difficult New Testament passages in general." After a long review of various interpretations he concludes: "The opponent is to show the 'faith without works' which is presupposed in his objection. Jas for his part promises to demonstrate faith from works. The opponent cannot fulfill the demand, since such faith simply is not capable of 'being shown.' Thus the author himself undertakes the examination which he is demanding." [6]

## **Mark 7:24-37**

{24} From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, {25} but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. {26} Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. {27} He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." {28} But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." {29} Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." {30} So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. {31} Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. {32} They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. {33} He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. {34} Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." {35} And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. {36} Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. {37} They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

24. *From there he set out*: "It appears to refer to the house mentioned in vii.17, but more probably points back to the plain of Gennesaret (vi.53-6)." [7] The comments about the

impossibility of Jesus avoiding recognition is an indication that his reputation had spread beyond Galilee in spite of his desire for privacy.

25-30: A woman asked Jesus to exorcise her daughter of a demon. The woman is identified as a Syrophoenician non-Jew. Jesus refused and insulted the woman. She accepted and made light of the insult, and as a result Jesus assures her that the demon has left her daughter. The healing of the child is a sign of God's mercy and peace towards the enemies of Israel (See, for example, the place of Tyre in Isaiah). Only Yahweh commands *shalom*, peace, to the Gentiles. Shalom is not the absence of strife, but health and wholeness and harmony with Yahweh.

31. *from the region of Tyre...by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis*: A glance at the map will show how round-about this route is.

32-35: A deaf man who spoke with difficulty is brought to Jesus, who heals him with accompanying actions ("he spat," "touched his tongue," "looked to heaven," "sighed," and spoke a word of power, and the man could hear and spoke plainly.

36: Again Jesus unsuccessfully seeks privacy. "Jesus was born to the low social status of a village artisan, and his claims to be 'the Son of God' would have been viewed as grasping in the extreme. Mark allows his readers to know that the claim is being asserted right from the beginning. But Jesus shows himself to be an honorable person by trying to keep such talk out of the public." [8]

37: The crowd are surprised by Jesus actions and pronounce a verdict of honor, "He has done everything well."

*he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak*: According to Isaiah 35:5-6, the return of the exiles will be accompanied by such a sign. The judgment of the crowd assigns Jesus a place in the spiritual and perhaps also material restoration of Israel.

## Reflection

Israel had sinned and the nation was broken and sent into exile. After many years Yahweh acted to save his people and restore the nation. He watches over strangers and upholds orphans and widows, even a Gentile mother and her possessed daughter. God's people are admonished not to be intolerant and bigoted because Yahweh is the God of all the earth. Instead, like Jesus they should seek to bring wholeness and healing to those in need, even when their need seems to indicate their moral poverty and worthlessness. True faith is not a possession but a motivation.

Jesus healed a Gentile girl and a man who was deaf. Both were social and religious rejects, and was he. He also forgave us, and brought us into company with them. Now we have the opportunity to bring health and wholeness to our world. May God make us firm in faith and strong of will to reflect his image in the world.

## Hymns [9]

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

419 --E--Lord of All	433 --II--The Church of
426 --D--O Son of God,	380 --G--O Christ, Our
423 --II--Lord, Whose Love	767s, 364, 823s/738v, 160
425 --II--O God of Mercy,	

## Prayers of the People [10]

Heavenly Father, you created all of us, rich and poor, near and far, respected by society and despised. Open our hearts and minds to our neighbours that we may serve you in serving them. Give us the courage to live out in daily life, the faith we confess on Sundays.

## **God who calls us to serve hear our prayer.**

Give more than we bring alone to the meetings of our congregational, synod, church and other councils. Whatever the council, make us mindful that we belong to you through our baptism into Christ. Mold from the clay of our thinking the will and actions of servants of God. Bless especially the Church Council of this Church that meets this next weekend. **God who calls us to serve hear our prayer.**

**Or [11]**

*Presider or deacon*

Let us pray to God for the poor in the world and for all in every danger and need.

*Deacon or other leader*

For *N* our bishop and *N* our presbyter, for this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For all peoples, tribes, clans, and families and for mercy, justice, and peace in the world.

For abundant fruits of the earth, and for safety from violent storms.

For the sick and the suffering, travelers and refugees, prisoners and their families, and the dying and dead.

For our city and those who live in it, and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.

Lifting our voices with all creation, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

**To you, O Lord.**

*Presider*

God of healing and salvation, hear us as we beg your mercy, open our ears to receive our word, and release our tongues to sing your praise, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **Notes**

[1] For other conditions in Lebanon, Sharon and Carmel see Isaiah 33:9

[2] Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976, p. 138.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

[7] Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955, p. 348.

[8] Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 204.

[9] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rclb9900.txt>

[10] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray\\_b2.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray_b2.txt)

[11] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>