



February 24, 2002

Prayer of the Day

Eternal God, it is your glory always to have mercy. Bring back all who have erred and strayed from your ways; lead them again to embrace in faith the truth of your Word and to hold it fast; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Genesis 12:1-4a

{1} Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. {2} I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. {3} I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." {4} So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.

The last story before this is that of the Tower of Babel, "the capstone to the Yahwistic primeval history." [1] "And now follows the new point of departure in the divine revelation of salvation: an address to a man amidst the multitude of existing nations, a constraining of this one man for God and his play of history by virtue of a free act of choice." [2]

2. *I will...make your name great:* A reference back to the Tower story, 11:4. The people failed in their effort to make a name for themselves, but Yahweh will make Abraham's name great.

2-3: "God now brings salvation and judgment into history, and man's judgment and salvation will be determined by the attitude he adopts toward this work which God intends to do in history. The thought of judgment, however, is here almost overarched by the words of blessing.... Our narrator does not yet consider what God begins here primarily as 'a sign that is spoken against' (Luke 2:34) but as a source of universal blessing." [3] This prophecy, which points to a fulfillment lying beyond the old covenant, was especially important to the retrospective glance of the New Testament witnesses. We find it cited in Acts 3.25 f.; Rom. 4.13; Gal. 3.8, 16." [4]

4a: "Abraham obeys blindly and without objection. The one word *wayyelek* ('and he set out') is more effective than any psychological description could be, and in its majestic simplicity does greater justice to the importance of the event.... Here is one of the passages where Abraham becomes a kind of model. Throughout the entire story one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men and women almost the impossible." [5]

Psalms 121

{1} I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? {2} My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. {3} He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. {4} He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. {5} The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. {6} The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. {7} The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. {8} The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

The Psalm is an entrance liturgy. At the gate of the singer asks where he may find help, and answers his own question. A priest responds in verses 3-8. Perhaps it could be read in the same fashion, with the congregation saying the first two verses and the Pastor or lector responding with the rest of the Psalm.

3. he who keeps you will not slumber...nor sleep: The singer declares that Yahweh is not like Baal, who may need to be awakened if he is to answer prayers (1 Kings 18:27).

6. The sun shall not strike you by day: Note the use of "shall" with the 3rd person, the indication of a determinative tense in English. [6] God has determined that the sun will not strike and injure one who is under his protection.

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

{1} What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? {2} For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. {3} For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." {4} Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. {5} But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.... {17} For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. {14} If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. {15} For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. {16} For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, {17} as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

1. our ancestor according to the flesh: Descent from Abraham was a source of pride among Judeans (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8; John 8:33-40).

3. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness: The quotation is from Genesis 15:6 (also quoted in Galatians 3:6).

15: The principle, no law—no sin, was referred to in the second lesson last Sunday, Romans 5:13. Here it is used to support the idea that the promise given Abraham was a gift not a reward for obedience to the law, which had not yet been given.

16-17. all his descendants: Abraham's descendants include all who share the faith of Abraham, not just those who keep the law (Judeans).

I have made you the father of many nations: Genesis 17:5 (LXX).

18: Abraham's faith is "in the presence of the God...who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

The Christian community in Rome was a mixture of Christian Jews and Gentiles. In this passage Paul has taken one of the sources of ethnic pride for one part of that community and, building on the tradition in the Torah, expanded it to include the Gentiles as well. On that principle, the Good News of the Gospel is not only for those who are physical descendants of the apostles, or of later Christians, but for all who put their faith in Christ. "The promises made to the patriarch will be shared by all who share his faith." [7]

John 3:1-17

{1} Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. {2} He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." {3} Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." {4} Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" {5} Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. {6} What is born of the

flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. {7} Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' {8} The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." {9} Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" {10} Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? {11} "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. {12} If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? {13} No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. {14} And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, {15} that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. {16} "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. {17} "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

1. a Pharisee named Nicodemus: Nicodemus is only mentioned in the Gospel of John, here and 7:50 and 19:39. In John 19:38-40 Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, "a respected member of the council" [the Sanhedrin?] (Mark 15:43), retrieved the body of Jesus after the crucifixion and prepared it for burial with spices.

a leader of the Jews: "While the word may mean that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the label surely identifies him as a member of the urban elite." [8]

3. being born from above: from above may also mean "again." The dual meaning is a literary device used deliberately in the passage. "Nicodemus takes Jesus to have meant 'again,' Jesus' primary meaning in vs. 3 was 'from above.' This is indicated from the parallel in iii 31, as well as from the two other Johannine uses of *anōthen* (xix 11, 23). Such a misunderstanding is possible only in Greek.... ..it is not impossible that the meaning 'again' is intended by John on a secondary, sacramental level...." [9]

5. born of water and Spirit: To be begotten of Spirit imbues a person with divine power. See Matthew 1:20 where Jesus is said to have been "from the Holy Spirit". There does not seem to be a specific sacramental connection here, but see 3:22-23 where Jesus and John both are baptizing. [10]

6: Birth of water and spirit is contrasted with fleshly birth. "For John 'flesh' emphasizes the weakness and mortality of the creature (not the sinfulness as in Paul); Spirit, as opposed to flesh, is the principle of divine power and life operating in the human sphere." [11] Like begets like; Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Son of God, and he baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

8. wind: In Greek, *pneuma*... and in Hebrew, *ruah*..., the same word means both "wind" and "spirit," which produces a very language-specific word play.

11-12. what we have seen...heavenly things: As one born of the spirit, Jesus is an eyewitness to the reality behind things that are seen, the spiritual world.

13-15. as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life: This is the spiritual reality that Jesus reveals. The Son of Man will, like the serpent in the wilderness, be lifted up and draw all to him, so they may live. (See the story in Numbers 21:4-9.) "Johannine scholarship commonly points out that while the duration of life (endless) is no doubt involved here, it is the *quality* of life, life of a new and better sort, that is central to John's antilanguage. It is the life that God lives and that the Son has from the Father (5:26; 6:57). ... This life emerges as Jesus bows his head and breathes out 'his spirit' (19:30). Jesus' final breath is in fact the new breath of life, surpassing in quality the original 'breath of life' with which God animated humankind (Gen. 2:7). [12]

16. For God so loved the world: "The aorist implies a supreme *act* of love. Cf. I John iv 9: 'In this way was God's love revealed in our midst: God has sent His only Son into the world that we may have life through him.' Notice that in I John the love is oriented toward Christians ('we') while in John iii 16 God loves the world." [13] Luther called

this verse the Gospel in miniature.

he gave his only Son: "The verb *didonai* here refers not only to the Incarnation (God sent the Son into the world; vs. 17), but also to the crucifixion (gave up to death—the idea found in being ‘lifted up’ in vss 14-15)... The background may be that of the Suffering Servant of Isa liii 12 (LXX): ‘He was given up [*paradidonai*] for their sins.’" [14]

may not perish...may have eternal life: See John 10:28 for the same contrast.

17: Jesus did not come to bring conflict and condemnation, but harmony and salvation. See John 8:15.

Reflection

In the first and second lesson God sends Abraham on a quest of which he knows nothing. He goes without question; he believes God and is reckoned to be righteous. Likewise Nicodemus, perhaps unknowing, sets out on a quest that will lead him to destinations he cannot imagine. All he has is Jesus’ oath on his honor that he knows what he is talking about. And now, we are called to follow the Lord, on his Way. What do we have? Only what the Psalmist said: "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore." Can we trust him? Will we?

Hymns [15]

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

290 --E--There's a Wideness

292 --D--God Loved the

261 --D--On What Has Now

544 --I--The God of

660v --I--I Want Jesus

445 --P--Unto the Hill

297 --II--Salvation unto Us

693v --G--Baptized in Water
(759s)

187, 195, 335, 500

Prayers of the People [16]

P or A: Opening our hearts and lives in belief, we turn to you our God and pray for all in need saying, "Hear us, O God," and responding, "Your mercy is great."

A: That your promises to your people may be proclaimed with faithfulness and joy, we pray for all ministers of the Word and for our proclamation in daily life and action. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: That according to your promise, all nations may know your blessing. Following the example of your faithful ones, we pray for our leaders and public servants. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: That parents and children, old and young, married and single may know that each has a place in your family and that your blessing freely may flow to the countless descendants of Sarah and Abraham, hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: Because you have the power to give life to the dead and call into existence things that do not exist, we pray to you for all those who are sick, sorrowful or alone, especially we remember _____. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: We give you thanks for all those who have followed you faithfully, both the bold and the timid, Abraham and Sarah, Paul, Nicodemus and John. Grant us faith to be your people, your family, your holy nation. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

P: O God who grants your people, rebirth, healing and salvation, hear our prayers and use us as part of your response to those who are looking for your help. Amen.

Or [17]

Presider or deacon

God sent the Son into the world to save the world. As we prepare for the paschal feast, let us earnestly beseech God to grant all peoples everywhere new birth in the Spirit.

Deacon or other leader

For the holy catholic church throughout the world, a sign on earth of the kingdom of God.

For N our bishop, for presbyters and deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For NN our catechumen(s) and NN their sponsors(s), and for all who wish to be born of the Spirit.

For all who share the faith of Abraham, and for all nations and families of the earth.

For all who are tempted, oppressed, afflicted, or in need.

For the dying and the dead.

For our families, friends, and companions, and for all those we love.

Presider

Blessed are you, God of Abraham and Sarah, who made of your people a great nation. Receive the prayers we offer this day for all those in need in every place and bless us as we come to your altar. Glory to you for ever and ever.

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Notes

[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*. London: SCM Press, 1961, p. 148.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[6] “use will with a subject in the first person and shall with a subject in the second or third person to express determination, promise, obligation, or permission, depending on the context.” <http://www.bartleby.com/64/C001/056.html>, November 3, 2001.

[7] *Loc. cit.*

[8] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 81.

[9] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, p. 130.

[10] In John 4:2 we are told that it was the disciples not Jesus who baptized.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[12] Malina, *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[13] Brown, *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[15] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rcla9899.txt>

[16] http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_a2.txt

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