

Proper 18



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.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

{15} See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. {16} If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. {17} But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, {18} I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. {19} I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, {20} loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Moses made a covenant with the people in Moab "besides the covenant which he had made with them at Horeb" (Deuteronomy 29:1). The first lesson from Deuteronomy is the conclusion of the description of the making of that covenant.

15.-18: Two ways lie before the people: life and prosperity, death and adversity. They are the consequences of obedience or disobedience. These two ways provide the structure for the deuteronomic history, Joshua-2 Kings, where the writer is very deliberate in calling attention to the working out of the consequences of obedience and disobedience. See also Deuteronomy 11:26.

16: See also Deuteronomy 10:12; 4:1; 5:31; 7:13; 8:1; 11:1, 22, etc. for similar requirements and promises.

19. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: See also Deuteronomy 4:26; 28:23-24; 11:17; 31:28. Heaven and earth stand as witnesses that the people of Israel have been offered both life and prosperity, life and death, blessings and cursings. If the people do not choose life the implication is that Yahweh will enforce the covenant through the powers of nature.

Choose life: The choice is Israel's. The opportunity to choose is repeated in Joshua 24:15 where Joshua leads the people in making a covenant with Yahweh when they have entered the land and arrived at Shechem.

20. so that you may live in the land that the Lord sword to give to your ancestors: The promises made to Abraham, which were unconditional, here are conditioned by obedience to the commandments, decrees and ordinances of God.

holding fast to him: An expression used in contrast to "following" Baal Peor, that is, being loyal to Yahweh in Deuteronomy 4:4.

Psalm 1

{1} Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; {2} but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. {3} They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. {4} The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. {5} Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; {6} for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The Psalm is a "wisdom" psalm. Wisdom is not an intellectual pursuit independent of life application; it is a means of living life in harmony with others, with the world and with God. The "law of The Lord provides the basis upon which true wisdom is founded, and in following that law life becomes rich and wonderful. The wise will be like well-watered trees, while the wicked will perish.

Philemon 1-21

{1} Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, {2} to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: {3} Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {4} When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God {5} because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. {6} I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. {7} I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. {8} For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, {9} yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. {10} I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. {11} Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. {12} I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. {13} I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; {14} but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. {15} Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, {16} no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {17} So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. {18} If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. {19} I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. {20} Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. {21} Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

1. Paul, a prisoner: Paul refers to his imprisonment in verses 9-10, where he indicates that during his imprisonment he became Onesimus' "father" (in Christ); verse 13, where he indicates his need and desire for Onesimus as his servant; and verses 22-23, where he indicates his expectation to be set free, and that Epaphras, is his fellow-prisoner. Paul does not say where he was in prison, and Caesarea, Rome and Ephesus have all been suggested.

and Timothy our brother: Timothy was Paul's child in the faith (1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1); see verse 10 for a similar description of Onesimus.

To Philemon: The letter is written to Philemon, a friend and co-worker, who hosted a house church, presumably in Colossae, where Onesimus, Apphia, and Archippus were members of the Christian community (Colossians 4:9, 17).

2. Apphia our sister: "Since her name follows immediately after Philemon's, one can assume that she is his wife." [1]

8. I am bold enough...to command you...yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love: Paul has the authority within the community of faith to order Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ, and not punish him for running away. But he would prefer that Philemon do this freely on the basis of love for Paul and Christian love for a brother in Christ, slave or free.

9. an old man: By calling himself "an old man" Paul is playing with the notion of his authority as a *presbyter*, an "elder" in the Christian community who has authority to command obedience. "Paul is alluding to his age. Paul is not employing his apostolic authority here; he is speaking to Philemon as an elderly man," expecting that Philemon will show his love and respect for Paul." [2]

10. my child Onesimus: The only use of the name in this letter. Onesimus is described as "Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" in Colossians 4:9 which suggests several things. First, that Onesimus and Philemon were from Colossae. Second, that Philemon responded favorably to Paul's letter. Third, that Onesimus became a

member of the Christian community in Colossae. And four, that Colossians was written after Philemon. An unanswered question is whether Onesimus went back to Rome to serve Paul.

11. useless...useful: This is a play on Onesimus' name, which means "useful." Onesimus was "useless" in the faith, but now he is "useful," worshipping God, interceding for others, helping Paul.

12-13: Paul wanted and still wants Onesimus to be with him and serve him in his imprisonment, but he wants Onesimus to consent to this voluntarily, without compulsion.

15: The reasoning in this verse is reverse reasoning. Since Onesimus is now a Christian, and since that happened because he ran away from Philemon, then his running away is the means by which he became a Christian. This kind of reasoning is not rigorously logical, but it has a kind of whimsical reality.

16. no longer as a slave but...a beloved brother: Paul does not deal with the issue of Onesimus' slavery or with the institution of slavery, but makes it clear that between Christians the issue and institution is changed. Love, not law will govern the relationship. See 1 Corinthians 7:21-24 for Paul's description of slaves who become Christians.

18-19. charge that to my account: Paul will stand surety for any loss Onesimus has caused his master. Philemon is deeply indebted to Paul, and by comparison any damage cause by Onesimus is trivial. In any case as a prisoner and itinerant preacher Paul had no earthly riches with which to compensate Philemon.

21. Confident of your obedience: Obedience, not to Paul, but to Christ's command to love.

you will do even more than I say: Paul is confident that Philemon will do more than receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul, as a beloved brother; does this imply that Paul hopes Philemon would free Onesimus?

Luke 14:25-33

{25} Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, {26} "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. {27} Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. {28} For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? {29} Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, {30} saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' {31} Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? {32} If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. {33} So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

26. does not hate...cannot be my disciple: "Hate" is descriptive of the exclusive commitment to Jesus required of disciples. "This abnegation is to be taken not psychologically or fanatically, but pneumatically and christocentrically." [3] Becoming a follower of Christ was disruptive of social relationships and even family unity. Early Christians left everything to follow Jesus and exchanged their place in their birth families for the Christian community which became a surrogate family for them. In Acts 2:44 f. and 4:32 the community is described as holding property "in common." This is the way family property was held with the father using it to benefit all members of the family.

even life itself: Life apart from Jesus is without value.

28-33: Two examples of starting a project (a tower or a war) and not being able to complete it are given, with the admonition to those who want to become disciples to count the cost and be prepared to renounce everything for the sake of that discipleship.

Reflection

Problems, weaknesses, confusion are the words that describe our lives. We pray that God will make us firm in faith, so we may hold fast to him, and live with him forever.

The lessons today call us to total commitment to the will of God. The Gospel reminds

us to count the cost of being Christian, because the cost is high, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions!". In Philemon's case it meant that he could not act as a slave owner would typically act toward a run-away slave, but would receive him with the love due a brother in Christ. That would, no doubt, mean the contempt and scorn of his social equals, and social or economic liability.

Grace is difficult to deal with. It is easier to understand the quid pro quo of the law: obey and be blessed, disobey and be punished. The covenant with Abraham was a covenant of grace. It required nothing from Abraham. In the first lesson we see grace made hostage by the law. In Galatians Paul struggles with the conflict between grace and law and resolves it in favor of grace: "the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise" (Galatians 3:17-18).

God's holiness and perfection demands absolute and unequivocal commitment and service. Clearly, only those who are perfect can stand before God, all others will perish. Just as clearly we are not perfect and cannot be perfect. In love God has provided for our salvation in Christ. Having been saved by grace, we have the opportunity to live wisely, delighting in God's law and meditating on it day and night.

Hymns [4]

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

808s --E--Christ Goes Before

398 --D--"Take Up Your

810s --D--Weary of All (785v)

505 --P--Forth in Thy

770v --P--I Was There

406 --G--Take My Life,

455 --G--"Come, Follow Me,"

504, 487, 812s/773v, 492

Prayers of the People [5]

P or A: God has called us to new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All that we ask of God is through the name of his Son, who lived and died for us. We pray in his name and respond together, saying "Amen."

A: That you would mold your church into a model of justice and fellowship for the world, as a potter molds clay into a work of beauty. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

A: That you would be with expectant mothers, watching over their health and transforming their anxieties about motherhood into confidence and joy. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

A: That you would free men and women from unjust labor arrangements, so that they may receive adequate wages for their work and live with dignity. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

A: That the sick and the dying may be healed by your hand. We pray especially for _____. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

A: For the courage to give up all that we cherish in this world to take up the cross of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

P: May we heed your call to live lives worthy of your name--and may our prayers be according to your will. We pray together as one body in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Or [6]

Presider or deacon

Let us pray to our loving God for all who bear the burdens of the world.

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 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 life and prosperity, hear us as we beg your mercy, and give us the strength to obey your commandments and to walk your ways, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Notes

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[1] Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, p. 190.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

[3] O. Michel, “[*miseo*],” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. by Gerhard Kittel). Grand Rapids, Michigan Eerdmans Publishing House. 1967, vol. 4, p. 691.

[4] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rc1c0001.txt>

[5] http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_c.txt

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