

Call to Worship

Psalm 122:1 I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord”.
What a joy it is to set aside this time to worship our God and sit in deep fellowship with him. Whether that be with others, or because of circumstances on your own, treasure this time.

Prayer

Heavenly Father it is a joy to come into your presence, to feel your closeness, to experience your love, to know of your grace. Lord, I lay at your feet my troubles, my anxieties, my worries. I confess I have tried to carry them on my own. Teach me today, and every day, to cast my burdens on you, to be free to live the abundant life you have promised. These things I pray in the name of Jesus who suffered on the cross for my burdens. Amen

Song: “How Deep the Father’s Love for us” (Stuart Townend)

1. How deep the Father’s love for us, how vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns his face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory.
2. Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon His shoulders.
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished.
His dying breath has brought me life, I know that it is finished.
3. I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom,
But I will boast in Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward? I cannot give an answer,
But this I know with all my heart, His wounds have paid my ransom.

© 1995 Thankyou Music (Admin. by SHOUT! Music Publishing Australia)
Used by permission CCLI 509237

Prayer of Intercession

Lord, in the wake of Australia Day, I pray for our nation. I love this country, I honour its leaders, I obey her laws, and I pray for her people. Thank you for all the benefits we enjoy.

I pray for those things I see and hear that show we have not measured up as a nation; how we have failed to recognise you as the King of kings. We have lost values that you have given to us in your word and suffered huge loss of life through abortion, the devaluing and destruction of marriage, the effects of violence, selfishness, and greed, the destructive impact of drugs, alcohol and gambling.

I pray for the victims, particularly for our aboriginal brothers and sisters, for the homeless, the unemployed, the refugees.

Good News, Bad News

I pray also with those who live in countries where Christians are persecuted, and for those in countries where there is a famine of the word of God. I pray for Wycliffe and its goal of getting the word of God to all language groups. I pray for the Bible Society with its strong mission to bring the Scriptures to the aboriginal people in their heart language. I pray for Open Doors which started smuggling Bibles into Russia 70 years ago and to this day takes the Scriptures to where they are needed. And I pray for Barnabas Aid bringing support and relief to the Suffering Church.

Hear my prayers, merciful and loving God.

Amen

Bible Readings:

- Romans 8:31-39

What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Song: “Just Let Me Say” (Geoff Bullock)

1. Just let me say how much I love You, let me speak of Your mercy and grace,
Just let me live in the shadow of Your beauty, let me see You face to face.
And the earth will shake as Your Word goes forth,
and the heavens can tremble and fall,
But let me say how much I love You O my Savior, my Lord and friend
2. Just let me hear Your finest whispers As You gently call my name,
And let me see Your power and Your glory, let me feel Your Spirit's flame,
Let me find You in the desert 'til this sand is holy ground,
And I am found completely surrendered To You, my Lord and friend.
3. So let me say how much I love You, with all my heart I long for You,
For I am caught in this passion of knowing this endless love I've found in You,
And the depth of grace, the forgiveness found, to be called a child of God
Just makes me say how much I love You, O my Savior, my Lord and friend,
Just makes me say how much I love You, O my Savior, my Lord and friend.

Message: “Good News, Bad News”

We use the word gospel a fair bit. It literally means “god spel”, which in old English means good news. That is also how we get the word “God”. The original translators had to choose an English word to give Jehovah, Yahweh, etc an English name. Because of God’s characteristic of being good, they chose that old English word “god”, and that’s how we refer to our Heavenly Father today (source: John Harris, Bible Society). And that’s why we have the word “gospel”, good news.

Every night I turn on the TV to watch the news. Nothing very much good about that news though. Every night it’s about the Hamas/Israeli conflict, the Russia/Ukraine conflict, the nightly reports of houses burned down, and stolen cars burned out, violence on the streets and in homes. Every night, stories that can only be called bad news.

This may be called the nightly “news”, but it’s not new. We only have to read the Bible (the prophets, the Psalms) to see that this sort of news has been happening for thousands of years. Regardless though, whether it happened all that time ago, or whether it’s happening today, it can be depressing. It sounds hopeless. God, what are you doing? Or maybe not doing? Where’s the good news, the gospel, in all that? Didn’t we light the candle of hope just a few weeks ago when we celebrated the good news of Jesus, coming as a baby, with angels singing about peace?

Add to this how we feel when we, or those close to us, face personal pain and suffering. We can’t avoid the very real questions that people, including ourselves, ask. God, what are you doing? Where are you? Why don’t you do something? Why me? – it’s not fair. Where is the good news, the gospel, in this? The pages of Scripture are full of these questions. The people of Israel groaned under the oppression of the Egyptians. The psalmist cried out to God – “Answer me when I call to you my righteous God, give me relief from my distress” (Psalm 4), “Hear my cry for help” (Psalm 5), “Have mercy on me Lord for I am faint, heal me Lord for my bones are in agony” (Psalm 6), “How long Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13). We read of the weeping for an exiled nation. “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping... (Jeremiah 31:15). Jesus himself echoed a Psalm as he cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22). And right up to the present day people suffer in a variety of ways, and the Persecuted Church we also call the Suffering Church. So, what about the good news, the gospel?

I have shared before about my friend in the advanced stages of cancer. He has survived years beyond his original diagnosis, has exhausted chemo and radiation treatments and lives in continuous severe pain alleviated a bit by the heaviest of medication. He became a Christian after his diagnosis, has railed against God and in his worst moments has even contemplated suicide. Just the other day when telling me this, he said, “Never in my whole life have I been happier.” His favourite throw-away line is, “If I live for another day, it is because God has something for me to do, and if I die, I go to be with him. That’s a win-win situation!” That is a powerful testimony of hope, enduring hope, living hope. That’s good news in the middle of what looks like bad news.

Good News, Bad News

Our questioning minds sometimes return to the question, why doesn't God step in to heal, to relieve pain, to restore, to answer prayers, to provide a miracle? Sometimes he does (he actually always answers our prayers!), at other times he stays his hand, and suffering becomes part of living, even living a life dedicated to Jesus. We have been blessed in the last few months with a couple of sermons on suffering by our HNSA service writers and I commend the re-reading of those.

It would be difficult to find a life of a Christian who has escaped suffering in some way. Think of the apostle Paul, think of all the disciples (with the exception of John) whom it is believed died violent martyrs' deaths. Think of Joni Eareckson Tada. Think of the millions of Christians in the Persecuted Church. Think of – I needn't go on.

I chose the song above. "Just Let Me Say" for the line, "Let me find you in the desert 'til this sand is holy ground". This means that whatever desert places we are in, God finds us there and we meet him there. Remember Psalm 23, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." But then, in the song, comes a staggering and confronting thing..... "'til this sand is holy ground"! Whatever suffering is our particular desert place, that becomes holy ground. That makes cancer holy ground. That makes deep loss holy ground. That makes pain and disability holy ground. Holy because that is where God is for us, holy because we are set apart for God to transform us in some way, to conform us to his will, to break us away from the things of this world that hold us and consume us, so that he can perfect us as sons and daughters of God. And what joy that is. It is no wonder Psalm 23 takes us from the valley of the shadow of death to the banqueting table where our cup overflows. No wonder Paul writes that he rejoices in his sufferings.

When Paul was writing his particular personal suffering (his "thorn"), and prayed to be released from it, the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Paul went on to say that he delighted in hardships, suffering, and persecution, because through them he became strong. In Colossians 1:24 Paul speaks of rejoicing in his suffering, and we get a glimpse of that when we hear the testimony of the Persecuted/Suffering Church.

Sometimes, our suffering does not seem to be connected to the gospel, the good news. How can some of the afflictions, painful diseases, disabilities that come unexpectedly have anything to do with the gospel? Sometimes it may be God using these circumstances to speak to us. Not many of us hear God clearly when we are comfortable, and things are going well. All life is about growth and maturing and the Christian life is the same; it flourishes under testing. Jesus himself was strengthened by testing. His time in the wilderness, suffering from hunger and deprivation was the time when Satan tested him, and it made him stronger for his ministry. And his weapon in that struggle was the word of God when he parried Satan's words through his knowledge of Scripture. Our suffering should also drive us to the word of God where the promises of hope, the assurances of the presence of God, the deep understanding of what Jesus has done for us, and the comfort and counsel of the Holy Spirit will be found.*

Good News, Bad News

And if you are suffering at the moment, don't neglect the fellowship of the church. Those close to me who are suffering say that the love and prayers of their brothers and sisters physically and spiritually sustains them. One said she had a vision of being surrounded by all those praying for her, and this has helped her through her most difficult times.

As you sing or say the hymn "Amazing Grace", dwell on the third verse. We have all come through dangers, toils, and snares of varying degrees, but it is God's grace that has kept us safe, and that grace will lead us home. You may be enduring suffering right now. God is there and you are on holy ground.

Song: "Amazing Grace" (John Newton)

1. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!
3. Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come:
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.
4. The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

© public domain

Benediction

Psalm 121 I lift my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.....

He will not let your foot slip, he who watches over you will not slumber.....

The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and evermore.

Amen

This service was prepared by Ron Tiller, HopeNet SA