



Trumpet's Sound

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Editor - Pastor Harry Hratsh Kiujian

Contact Address:

ACM AUSTRALIA
PO BOX 1593,
CHATSWOOD NSW 2057
EMAIL: hkiujian@acmaust.org
URL: www.acmaust.org

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Prayer points

Armenia needs your prayers

- Pray for the many people suffering with COVID
- Pray for the children as they go back to school
- Pray for the border situation and that peace will be restored
- Pray for Lebanon and the poverty many there are facing
- Pray for the many families in our care in Armenia, Karabakh, Syria and Lebanon
- Pray for our co-workers on the mission field

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who donate out of the generosity of their hearts.*

The cross

It appears that the cross was invented by the Persians in the sixth century BC. Not long afterwards, the Greeks started to punish criminals by crucifixion, and then the Romans did the same.

At the time when the Romans were occupying Jerusalem, the Jewish people were well aware of the punishment of the cross. When Jesus was being tried, they all started calling out "Crucify Him, crucify Him".

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus willingly took the punishment of the cross, for without the cross there is no salvation for mankind. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness for sin.

What does the cross mean to us today? Many people complain by saying "I bear a very heavy cross", "My cross is too much to bear". When people say this, they are mistaken about what the cross really means. They are thinking that the difficulties of this life are a cross we have to bear! And many times, these "crosses" are made by us, because of our behaviour, language, attitude, and character. But what did the cross mean in the time of the Lord Jesus?

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

In the first century a person who was carrying a cross was not putting up with some problems he faced in daily life. The cross was not a difficult neighbour. It was not a health problem. The cross was not something given to people to make them better citizens!

A person carrying a cross was on his way to death. He was not do-

ing something to make him a better person. He was on a journey to end his life.

What then did the Lord mean by taking up the cross? When He carried His cross, He was on His way to death. We take up our cross and follow Him.

In the first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul said, "I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily". What did he mean? Possibly two things:

- He was prepared to face death for the sake of the Lord Jesus. Many times, in his proclamation of the gospel, his life was on the line.
- He died to self each day. His personal ambitions were counted as nothing in order to please the Lord Jesus and serve Him faithfully.

Every believer is called to bare a cross; we do this because of our faith in the Lord. For some it means persecution and actual death, but for all of us it means that we die to self and seek to live only for the Lord Jesus. Bearing the cross will keep us closer to the Lord we love and serve.

Next time you feel the weight of the cross, remember Jesus who gave His all for the salvation of the world.

H. K.

Psalm 32

Psalm 32 is the second psalm that has been labelled as a penitential psalm. In it we see the anguish the psalmist experienced before he turned in repentance to the Lord and confessed his transgressions.

The psalm begins with a beatitude as did Psalm 1. There, the man who walked in the way of the Lord was blessed; here it is the man whose transgression has been forgiven and whose sin is covered.

We notice the four ways in which evil is described: transgression (or disobedience), sin, iniquity, deceit. Transgression is the breaking of a specific law; it is an act of rebellion or disobedience. Sin is missing the standard which God sets; we have fallen short (often deliberately) of His standard. Iniquity covers any wrong act while deceit involves a cover-up of our intentions so that others are not aware of our sins.

Before David confessed his sins he had tried to suppress any sense of guilt, but could not. When he kept silent, he wasted away because of his constant groaning. He found God's hand was heavy on him. His strength was sapped as in the summer heat.

David reached the point where he acknowledged his sin to the Lord. He stopped trying to hide his iniquity. He confessed his transgressions to the Lord, and found that God forgave the iniquity of his sin. And we learn the blessings that come to the person who confesses his sin.

- His transgressions are forgiven. If a person has been forgiven, he has been released from any obligations he faces. A person who has been forgiven a debt, does not have to repay the loan. A person whose sins have been forgiven does not have to pay the penalty for his sins.
- His sins are covered. This reminds us of the ritual of the Day of Atonement. The high priest entered the Most Holy Place first with the blood of a bullock for his sins and for the sins of his family. He then entered with the blood of a goat for the sins of the people. This blood placed on the Mercy Seat was seen as a covering of the people's sins. In Old Testament times, if a person's sins were covered, then he was able to continue in fellowship with God.
- His iniquity is not reckoned against him. In other words, he is seen as righteous. A person who can keep the law perfectly is righteous; he is on the right side of the law and the law has no claims against him. But a person who has broken the law may be set right again by paying the penalty for his sin. But this is an impossible situation for sinners because the wages of sin is death – spiritual death. This is eternal separation from God. But some-

one has paid the penalty for our sin. Jesus Christ the righteous one has died for our sin so that if we believe in Him, we are reckoned righteous. This means that for a believer, his iniquity is not reckoned against him.

The psalmist urges everyone who is godly to pray in a time when God may be found. Those who do so will be protected by Him. In time when floods overflow, they will be safe. This is because the Lord is their hiding place. He not only gives shelter in times of trouble but also puts a song of praise on their lips.

Verse 8 is central to the teaching of the psalm. God says that He will instruct us and teach us which way we should take. We think of the Lord Jesus saying that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He has sent the Holy Spirit to lead us in the way we should go. He teaches us. Furthermore, His eye is on us to preserve us as well as to guide us.

We are clearly told not to be like a horse or a mule. A mule has a greater reputation for stubbornness than a horse but neither animal has any understanding and needs to be controlled by bit and bridle to ensure it is obedient. Unless controlled, they will not come near us.

The wicked refuse to yield to the will of the Lord and as a result many sorrows come their way. They stand in contrast to those who trust in the Lord. Loving kindness surrounds them.

As we let our minds dwell on this, we hear the command to be glad in the Lord and rejoice. The upright are indeed able to shout for joy.

In this psalm we are encouraged to confess our sin the moment we are conscious of doing wrong. We are also taught to allow the Lord to teach us the way we should go and to let Him guide us with His eye. Then we will enjoy the blessedness of the person whose transgression has been forgiven and whose sin is covered.

Don Stormer



Petty rules and Scruples

Romans 14

What does it mean to live with Christians whose faith is at different stage from our own? The Bible is full of amazing images that describe what it means to be a Christian. It tells us that individual Christians are like stones being put together by a builder to construct a place where God lives. We are not bricks, we are stones. A brick building is very different from a stone building. Bricks arrive at a building site, identical in size and shape, and ready to be laid together. Bricks are all the same size because they have come out of the same mould. This makes them tidy. But we human beings don't come out of a mould exactly the same, do we? In fact we are unity. We are more like stones, all different sizes and shapes. No stone arrives at the building site perfectly shaped for its place in the building. The builder has to chip and shape those stones so they will eventually fit together.

That process of being chipped and reshaped to fit together can be a painful one and we don't have to be in a community with other Christians for long to find that out. How do we cope with all our differences? As stones in God's building we are at different points in this process of being chipped and reshaped to fill our unique role in God's great building.

People with a weak faith are just as precious to God. They are just as safe in God's love as people with a strong faith. The question is not how much faith we have but where we put what faith we've got. Even a weak faith in a great God will save us. But having a weak faith will affect our enjoyment of the life God has given us.

What does Paul mean by weak faith? "Another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables" (verse 2). The implication is that a man with a strong faith eats anything he likes. In the ancient world there were some religions that forbade the eating of meat. People in those religious groups would have been taught that eating meat displeased whatever gods they believed in. Now when these people became Christians, they found themselves in a church where people

were free in Christ to eat meat if they wanted to. They had liberty in Christ and God had given them everything to enjoy. However these new converts could not shake their old ideas about eating meat. They rejected something that God has said was acceptable. Paul is saying that to be locked up with petty rules and regulations is a symptom of weak faith.

Paul chose another typical example of petty rules and regulations. "One man considers one day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike" (verse 5). Once again, the implication is the man with weak faith has scruples about one day being more important than others. A man with a strong faith believes that God made every day of the week, and that He should be honoured and enjoyed every day of the week. Paul wrote to the Colossians. "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath." (Colossians 2:16).

The two issues mentioned here about whether it is acceptable to eat meat, or whether you should have a special holy day each week or not, are examples of the kind of thing Paul is talking about. Every generation seems to have different issues. We all know people who have rigid ideas about some detail of faith, and I suppose most of us have minor points that we feel strongly about. These are not absolute moral issues, but are details of how people express their faith. Rigidity about religious detail is called having scruples. We sometimes are told that people with many rules and scruples are super-spiritual. The Bible says the opposite. The person with many petty rules and scruples is a person with weak faith. People who hang on to scruples need to ask God to help them honestly answer vital questions about themselves. "The rules I keep, are they simply my personal way of expressing love and devotion to God? Or are they something I cling to in the hope that I can persuade God to be pleased with me? Are they evidence that I don't have faith strong enough to really believe that Christ is sufficient to put me right with God?"

So how do the people with strong faith and people with weak faith tend to treat each other? Verse 3 highlights two attitudes:

- People with strong faith who have freedom in Christ look down on weak Christians with all their petty rules and endless discussions about whether it is acceptable to do this or that. They wonder when they are going to start enjoying the freedom of a mature Christian in Christ.
- People with weak faith condemn the people with strong faith. They cannot imagine how anyone could live without their rules and be a serious Christian.

How should these people treat each other? The answer is summed up in the first word of the first verse. Accept. Often when we interact with people who have different views from ourselves, we tolerate them but we do not accept them. Sometimes we come to them with a hidden agenda to persuade them to change and see it our way. Then we would accept them. How that other person expresses his faith and devotion to God, whether it be with rules or without rules is not our business. Our job is not to make decisions about their faith, but to accept them.

It is interesting that on issues like eating meat, or considering one day more sacred than another, Paul does not arbitrate or come up with a decision as to which is right or wrong. There is no judgment. He simply says to accept one another. "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (verse 17). The kingdom of God invites us to an idea that seems outrageous to this world: righteousness, peace and joy. These are not found in demanding our rights to live our own way. They are found in learning to love. In sacrificing our own rights we gain something much better. We grow in love, peace and joy. True holiness is joyful, attractive and full of life.

God is not calling us to a miserable bunch of rules. He is calling us to a better life than we could ever have imagined. A new life in a new kingdom where righteousness, peace and joy are what it is all really about.

That is why Christ died, that is why Christ lives and that is the marvellous life He calls each one of us to.

A Sinless life

Let's try to imagine how different your life would be if you had no sin. Why? Because many people feel that their sins are few and insignificant – they don't realise just how much sin has corrupted them. This is not an easy exercise, but it's worth trying.

So, to begin with, your sinless life would be governed by love, first for God and then for those around you. All your interactions with family, friends, colleagues and strangers would reflect your love for God and your neighbours. You would never fail in your duty to others or your duty to God.

Your love for God would be total – heart, soul, mind and strength. There would be no deviation or change in your love because it would not be less than it ought to be, and it could not be more. Your love would be seen in your obedience to God, an obedience that was willing, joyful and immediate. Your faith in God would never waver and your prayer would be real, abundant, intimate, unaffected and free.

Your love for your neighbours would also be willing and complete. You would never be reluctant to care for others before yourself and you would never have to acknowledge that you could have done more or better in any given situation. You would never be lazy, selfish or self-centred. You would never indulge in self-pity or revengeful thoughts. You would never exalt yourself over others or put others down. You would never speak any falsehood but only the truth in love. You would never have had to apologise for anything done or said, or left undone or unsaid, nor would you ever have had to withdraw anything said rashly or foolishly.

Your daily walk would be characterised by a peace which would never be disturbed by difficult circumstances or insults, and your refreshing joy would stand in stark contrast to those around you who are fearful, moody, cynical and greedy. You would not be proud. Your humility and simple contentment would be a blessing to everyone who touched your life. You would be the same person to both the beggar and the king.

None of this would be something to which you had attained through training, devotion or discipline – it would have been your way from your earliest childhood, and only matured and deepened with the passing of years.

You would never have known the pangs of guilt, you would have no fear of future judgment, and you would never have had to ask either God's mercy or man's forgiveness. You would be conscious of no fault in yourself. There would be, and there always would have been, perfect consistency and harmony between your thoughts, words and deeds. Your mind would be pure, your love real, your compassion active, your prayer genuine.

There may be much more that might be added, but we are so far removed from anything like such a wonderful life that it would be laughable if it were not so serious. Just a few moments of thoughtful consideration enable us to see that sin is so much a part of our being that there is nothing we can do to escape its corruption.

Dear reader, Jesus of Nazareth lived the life described here, and much more. No one else has ever even claimed to have lived as He did. The rest of us, from birth, are dead in sin.

The Lord Jesus came into the world to be the sinless offering to save our souls. His sacrifice of Himself, and the power of God that raised Him from the dead, open the only possible way of salvation.

I am sure that you can see how impossible it is to become righteous before God by our own weak efforts to change what we are.

The death of the Lord Jesus, who died to pay the penalty that we deserve is our only hope for salvation. By the grace of God alone, through confessing our great need and by putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Saviour, we can come to know wonderful forgiveness, peace and an abundant life.

Is your sin forgiven? Do you know the Lord Jesus as your Saviour? Are you ready to meet Him?

God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:17)

Outsiders became insiders in Damascus (1)

In antiquity, Damascus (in Syria) was a great centre for trade. The city's location along a river at the crossroads of two major international highways (the Via Maris and the King's Highway) ensured its prosperity and importance.

Although Damascus is close to the desert, ample supplies of water from two rivers allow the region to support vineyards and abundant crops of fruits, grains, nuts, cotton, wool, silk, and olives. The Abana River (known today as the Barada) is the primary water source for Damascus. It flows from the northwest mountains through a deep ravine into the city. The Pharpar River (now al-Awaj) runs on the outskirts of Damascus, supplying water to the gardens and orchards. Together these rivers irrigate about 1040 square km (400 square miles) of land.

Many biblical characters visited the ancient city of Damascus. Abraham probably went through Damascus when he travelled to Canaan from Haran (Genesis 12:4-5). He passed through Damascus when he rescued Lot from a group of Mesopotamian kings (Genesis 14:15). His servant would have travelled through Damascus on his way to Aram Naharaim in search for a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:10). And his grandson Jacob probably went through Damascus on his way to Paddan Aram.

Damascus was the capital of Aram (and is now the capital of Syria). Aram was one of Israel's enemies. They were polytheistic and hostile to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Naaman

In Old Testament times, the Jews were God's people and the Gentiles (including those in Damascus) were outsiders to their covenant with God.

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, lived in Damascus (2 Kings 5:1 NIV). When he went to Israel to be healed from

leprosy, he initially rejected the prophet Elisha's advice to wash seven times in the Jordan River. He claimed, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage" (2 Kings 5:12).

But after obeying and being healed he changed his belief and said "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15-17). And he promised to "never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord".

As a result of the miraculous healing, Naaman converted to following the God of Elisha and the Jews. He returned to Damascus a changed man, now being a proselyte from polytheism to Judaism.

City destroyed

The Old Testament contains judgments on the enemies of Israel, including Damascus.

About 740BC, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "A prophecy against Damascus: 'See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins. The cities of Aroer will be deserted

and left to flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid. The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim [northern kingdom of Israel], and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the Israelites,' declares the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 17:1-3).

Damascus and other cities in Syria were to be destroyed. Because of its alliance with Syria, Ephraim (the kingdom of Israel) was also destroyed. Only a remnant remained in Syria and Israel after the Assyrian invasion.

About BC 740, Amos 1:3-5 also predicted the destruction of Damascus. Damascus was destroyed by the Assyrians in BC 732 (2 Kings 16:9). Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel fell in BC 722.

About BC 600, Jeremiah also predicted the Babylonian invasion of Damascus (Jeremiah 49:23-27). Damascus was later rebuilt and remained an influential city.

Why I call cancer my blessing

For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Timothy 4:8). I never knew how much I needed God's Word imbedded in my life until I was diagnosed with cancer almost 13 years with a Gleason score of 9; my PSA reading is now 73.

Cancer is a journey. It's a daily walk with God and I would never change it for anything. For some people, cancer is a horrible sickness leading to death. For others, it's a shameful sickness they try to keep secret. Others do not want to use the C word, saying it is a horrible sickness. For others, it's a curse.

I once wrote an article with the heading, "Cancer is my blessing", and a lady called me to ask, "How can you call cancer a blessing?" I told her my cancer is my blessing. Let me explain what I mean.

Cancer can bring us closer to God; we come to know Him in a way that we have not known Him before. We can say with Job "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). Doctors gave me less than three years to live but God had other plans.

One of the most important things we can do in hard seasons is to hold on to His promise and never let it go. Satan may try to distort the truth in our minds. Friends may try to do the same. I had a close friend who said, "Stop everything! Close your business, end your ministry, go and buy yourself a beach house and lay in the sun all day!" That was 13 years ago and if I had listened to him, I would have been a fried lobster by now.

In the past 13 years I have been blessed to live my life for Jesus. I have travelled to Armenia fifteen times; my three children have each been married and God has blessed us with five grandchildren. Our ministries in Australia and in Armenia have been blessed and expanded. My daily devotional talk which I send out has passed its 500th recording.

I thank the Lord that I have grown to see how deep and wide God's love is for me, and my wife and I have seen our love grow to another dimension. However the best part of this journey was having Jesus in the centre of it all.

My medication has 46 different side effects and while they wear out my body, I wake up with a zeal and a new song each day. I wonder at times where the zeal comes from. How does the Lord provide like this? Indeed, He works beyond our understanding.

I am not blind to reality; I can see what is happening to my body, but you should see my spirit. It is in our weakness that we see His strength. My numbers are indeed climbing, and my body is deteriorating, but the inner peace keeps me going. At the moment I suffer with seven illnesses. I am on thirteen tablets and two injections each day. I know that my days on earth are numbered, but I look forward to eternity, a place with no sickness, pain or tears.

Oh how much I have argued with God, saying "If I were to create a world, I would never permit hardship, pain, sickness or death in it". and God has responded by reminding me He did just that. He put Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, where there was no pain, no sickness, and no death whatsoever. Yet men failed, and it was our own sin that brought us to this troubled state in the world. But God in the richness of His love sent us His only begotten Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

While on radiation I needed to go to the basement of the hospital at 7:00am each day for two weeks. People get shivers up their spines there. One takes the lift to go underground, and arrives in a cold large room with dim lighting and no windows. Chairs are placed in a large circle and are occupied by people of all ages. Many are in hospital gowns. Sons are carrying the frail bodies of their mothers. Mothers are carrying their teenagers whose weak bodies have no hair, no eyebrows. Babies as white as snow are crying. This is the underground room nightmares are made of.

We all sat in the waiting room, staring at each other in a shock, as if we were guessing who would be next to die. A man in his late fifties

was sitting next to me and he asked me how I was coping. In few words I tried to tell of my faith in the Lord. He went on to share with me how he had lost his job, his wife had left him, and his friends at the pub weren't interested in him anymore. He told me that when he goes home after his treatment, he is just locked between four walls, isolated, depressed. Sadly, he got called in for his radiation and we could not continue our conversation any longer, but his desperation impacted me deeply.

In one corner of this basement, there was a display unit with some brochures from the health department. The titles, all different, were about different types of cancers. I took the one about prostate cancer. On the back page it stated that "If you have any spiritual understanding, any faith, we strongly recommend you follow it as it will help you immensely". I was so shocked to read these words because people have tried to stop us teaching scripture and praying in schools. They try to remove any mention of spiritual things from daily life, and now we are on our death beds they encourage us to lean on our spiritual understandings!

Jesus says "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). It is very hard when my body starts to fail, and my energy level drops to zero. I can hardly bring myself to get up and walk. I have started using a walking stick. One day, in my prayers I said to the Lord "Father why did You break my arms?" His immediate response was "I have only clipped your wings." I started to sob heavily. As a boy I used to breed pigeons and the ones I loved and wanted to train, I would clip their wings to keep them by my side. Our weakness and sicknesses bring us closer to Him. They help us see life from a different dimension.

My response was "Lord thank You for Your love". Yes friend, you too may feel that your arms have been broken, but instead the Lord has only trimmed your wings that together we may remain in Him.

Our journey has not ended and the closer we remain to Him the sweeter He becomes. Our victory is in Christ, and we look forward to being in His presence. One day we will fall down on our knees and worship Him, free from pain and sickness and in the fullness of the life and joy He brings.