

A service for 4th September, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3

Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God. Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the LORD, and they study it day and night. They are like trees that grow beside a stream, that bear fruit at the right time, and whose leaves do not dry up. They succeed in everything they do. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Thomas Obadiah Chisholm in 1923. He was ordained as a Methodist minister in 1903. Unfortunately, his health broke down within a year and he was forced to stand down, becoming an insurance salesman in later life. Although it became a favourite hymn in the Moody Bible Institute, this hymn remained largely unknown in the United Kingdom for four decades. Mind you, when it appeared in “The Baptist Hymnbook” of 1962, it deservedly became popular with every denomination. We shall sing hymn number 51, ‘Great is thy faithfulness’.

**1. Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not; thy compassions, they fail not;
As thou hast been thou forever shall be: Chorus:**

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see.

All I have needed thy hand has provided.

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

**2. Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness,
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love. Chorus:**

**3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside! Chorus:**

© Thomas O. Chisholm (1866 – 1960)

In our opening prayer, when I say, ‘Amazing God’, please respond with, ‘We adore you’. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we have come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the whole universe to life, but you love and sustain all living beings. Your wisdom and power are as unfathomable and boundless as is your love for flawed and fallen humanity. We rejoice that when you raised Jesus from the grave, you not only broke the power of death, but reconciled us to you, undeserving as we are.

‘Amazing God’ ‘**We adore you**’.

Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you bought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan and to atone for the sins of the world. You are the source of eternal life through the empty tomb.

‘Amazing God’ ‘**We adore you**’.

Holy Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide, we know that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into our discipleship. Fill us with your power and help us fulfil our calling.

'Amazing God' 'We adore you'.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you renew all things through the cross and empty tomb. We ask you to hear and accept our praise and worship today. **Amen.**

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for challenges and opportunities that test and develop our character; for everyone who guides, inspires and loves us, but most of all for your undying love, even in times when we are loveless and faithless. Merciful Lord, forgive us when we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving or judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'hear our prayer'.

Help us to change our ways as we reflect upon and acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives bear good news to our neighbours. Re-ignite the embers of our faith, to a holy flame, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here in spirit, love and truth.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'hear our prayer'.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more, free from the burden of our sins. Hereafter, may we serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives bring you honour in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Our next hymn was written in June 1966 by a former West Yorkshire school teacher, Rosamond Herklots, whilst she was digging out weeds in her nephew's garden. It shows that the Holy Spirit can talk to us anywhere and any-time. Hymn number 423, "Forgive our sins as we forgive,"

**1. 'Forgive our sins as we forgive',
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.**

**2. How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?**

**3. In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you!**

**4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.**

© Rosamond E. Herklots (1905 – 1987)

We shall now bring our concerns for other people, nearby and far away, to the Lord our God.

Loving God, although we live on a wonderful and self-sustaining planet, the news Media speaks of its brokenness and is often so gloomy it daunts our spirits. Nevertheless, we believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of our neighbours, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to heal our world.

Author of peace, we grieve about the number of conflicts around the world, especially at present, conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Guide the leaders of all nations to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, rather than resorting to war. Warm and mould their hearts so they seek justice and mercy in their dealings so that lasting peace can be built on solid foundations.

In your mercy Lord, may a negotiated peace be established soon between Russia and Ukraine: one that enables Ukraine to continue as an independent democracy. Grant President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia, the steadfast courage, wisdom and resources to resist Russia's might until peace is established. Most of all, merciful God, hear our prayer for civilians, mainly women, children, the elderly and disabled, who are trapped in cities that are being bombarded by Russian forces. Enfold them in your care that they may be comforted and protected. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees. Grant then a warm welcome from host nations and generous hospitality to ease their distress.

Lord our provider, we pray for organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to famine-stricken Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. May the relaxing of the blockade of Ukraine's ports continue to allow the export of much-needed grain and oil to these countries. We offer our prayer for victims of severe flooding in Pakistan, asking that they receive much needed help as soon as possible.

We remember, too, people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy, fuel and food increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which help the poor. Nevertheless, may the Government and other agencies, including charities and local councils find ways of helping all who are finding it difficult to manage.

God of healing and wellbeing, hear our prayer for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; neighbours who are living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. Heavenly Father, in a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.
Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but warm them with your love which offers comfort, healing, courage and peace that passes all understanding.

Holy Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Renew and invigorate our calling as we seek new ways to serve our communities, as we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission

and may the Spirit of truth and love help us bear the gospel light to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

Our lesson is Paul's Letter to Philemon verses 1 to 21

From Paul, a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy—To our friend and fellow-worker Philemon, and the church that meets in your house, and our sister Apphia, and our fellow-soldier Archippus: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Brother Philemon, every time I pray, I mention you and give thanks to my God. For I hear of your love for all God's people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus. My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in union with Christ. Your love, dear brother, has brought me great joy and much encouragement! You have cheered the hearts of all God's people.

For this reason I could be bold enough, as your brother in Christ, to order you to do what should be done. But because I love you, I make a request instead. I do this even though I am Paul, the ambassador of Christ Jesus, and at present also a prisoner for his sake. So I make a request to you on behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while in prison I have become his spiritual father. At one time he was of no use to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in prison for the gospel's sake, so that he could help me in your place. However, I do not want to force you to help me; rather, I would like you to do it of your own free will. So I will not do anything unless you agree.

It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time. And now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me! And how much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord! So, if you think of me as your partner, welcome him back just as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to my account. Here, I will write this with my own hand: I, Paul, will pay you back. (I should not have to remind you, of course, that you owe your very self to me.) So, my brother, please do me this favour for the Lord's sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up!

I am sure, as I write this, that you will do what I ask—in fact I know that you will do even more. At the same time, get a room ready for me, because I hope that God will answer the prayers of all of you and give me back to you. Amen.

Our next hymn was written in 1965 by Revd. Frederik Kaan, a Dutchman who served as Moderator of the West Midlands Province of the URC. Hymn number 696, 'For the healing of the nations,'

**1. For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
For a just and equal sharing
Of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love and action
Help us rise and pledge our word.**

**2. Lead us, Father, into freedom;
From despair your world release,
That, redeemed from war and hatred,
All may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
Fear will die and hope increase.**

**3. All that kills abundant living,
Let it from the earth be banned:
Pride of status, race, or schooling,
Dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice,
May we hallow life's brief span.**

**4. You, Creator-God have written
Your great name on humankind;
For our growing in your likeness
Bring the life of Christ to mind;
That by our response and service
Earth its destiny may find.**

© Fred Kaan (1929) (courtesy of Stainer & Bell Ltd.)

Sermon: *'Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.'* Philemon v. 11
It is tempting to think that Paul's letter to Philemon is a straightforward, reasonable request that Paul's friend would have no difficulty acceding to. However, when we look into the background of the story, Philemon was being asked a very big favour indeed, which is why Paul structured his letter in such a way that it put Philemon under great moral pressure to act against his conscience, for slavery was an accepted part of life in the Roman Empire and Paul did not challenge it, contrary to remarks in one of my commentaries. Indeed, the Roman way of life depended upon slaves, just as we depend on household appliances and computerised machinery today, whereas when my mother was a girl, most houses had floors that needed to be swept, grates that needed to be black-leaded, doorsteps that had to be stoned white and washing done in a copper before being run through a mangle and hung out to dry! It is estimated that there were sixty million slaves in the Empire when Paul wrote this letter – half the population.

In order that the middle and upper classes of society could enjoy life, slaves were controlled with considerable rigour, even cruelty: they had no rights; answering back or disobedience would invariably result in a flogging; a repeat of the offence could result in the slave's face being branded with a red-hot iron, or their being imprisoned. A slave who stole from his or her master, or who ran away, would usually be put to death, often

by crucifixion, as a deterrent to other slaves. Slave owners were expected to show solidarity, so a hard line was demanded of them all, if a slave broke any rule.

St. Paul's letter is remarkable, not least because he spoke up for Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who had not only absconded, but Onesimus had probably taken either money, or property before fleeing, for verse 18 says, **'If he has done you wrong, or owes you anything, charge it to me'**. It is fair to deduce that the slave was not only a runaway, but a thief as well. Imagine the position in which Paul's request put Philemon, who had lost a slave and, in all probability, money or property, yet who was asked not to punish him. **Indeed, Paul made so bold as to ask that Onesimus should be given his freedom.** Imagine what the other slave owners would have felt about rewarding a slave for absconding and theft by making him a free man! We need to bear in mind that **Philemon lived in Colossae**, a city noted for its cloth-production, especially a dark red woollen cloth known as **Colossinum**, so slaves would have been a vital part of the economy and keeping them in order would have been a major preoccupation of the upper and middle classes, so Philemon stood to lose more than his slave if he agreed to Paul's request, yet we have no reason to think that he denied his friend.

The letter began with a greeting to Philemon, his **wife Apphia** – who would have had direct control over the house slaves – and Philemon's house church, thanking and praising him for his love and faith through Christ Jesus, that had refreshed and strengthened his fellow Christians. Then, rather than using his authority as the one who had brought Philemon to Christ, Paul pleaded with his friend as a prisoner, not only of Rome, but of obedience to Christ, in whose name he was making his appeal, not on his own account. It is most likely that Onesimus had sought refuge with Paul at **Ephesus**, or had gone to see Paul on an errand and overstayed, but during that time he had been converted by Paul and had been transformed from a useless slave, **(Onesimus can mean useless in Greek)**, to somebody vital and good.

Paul declared that he was sending Onesimus back to his master, trusting that he would receive grace – undeserved kindness – but by doing so he gave the slave an opportunity to show how he had been changed, for by returning voluntarily, Onesimus might have been going to his death – literally carrying his cross. But he was also doing what is called for from all sinners, turning from wrongdoing back towards the Lord. **After all, the cry of Old Testament prophets was shub! – turn round and return to the Lord!** Paul's Letter to Philemon is more than a request on behalf of an errant slave: it speaks of Jesus' transforming, redemptive, generous love, for both Philemon and Onesimus were changed; it speaks of the need to turn from the wrong path, that is to repent, but most of all it speaks of the need to forgive, to show the kind of grace that we all need from God.

We, too have been released from our enslavement, but at what a cost, for although St. Paul promised to repay Philemon for losses incurred by his slave, God's own Son paid for our sins on a cross at Calvary. And not just our sins, but all people who repent in Jesus' name are promised forgiveness. Faced with the knowledge of the willingness of God to forgive our sins, how could Philemon fail to accede to Paul's letter, even if it incurred the wrath, or disdain of fellow slave-owners!

In addition, Paul's letter proclaims the fellowship of all Christians, irrespective of status, gender, age, disability, race, colour, or anything else. He wrote these lines to the Colossians: **'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all'**. Today, let us remember that it is only two hundred years since the slave trade was abolished in the

British Empire, yet many people from the Commonwealth still do not receive equal treatment, especially in educational and employment opportunities, whilst in many parts of the world children work long hours for less than two dollars a day – often in dangerous conditions – as bonded labourers, producing goods like footballs, sweaters and T-shirts which are sold at high prices in the United Kingdom and Europe. Worse still, there have been several expose of modern-day slavery in this country, ranging from agricultural gang masters, the sex trade and hand car washes centres. These exploit and abuse vulnerable members of society: the young; East Europeans and especially trafficked or illegal immigrants.

The Letter to Philemon tells us that everybody is of inestimable value to God, for Jesus gave his life for all people, not just an exclusive group. We are challenged, therefore, to stand up against trade injustice, modern slavery, against child-labour in the Developing World and any kind of prejudice, not because we want to play at being politically correct, but because this is the cross we are called to carry for Christ. Inevitably, we will face opposition from those who will argue that **‘this is the way of the world’**, or **‘without cheap labour, the economic system will collapse.’** Interestingly, this was precisely the argument used by slave owners at the time of William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp and John Newton, and also by those who opposed the 1860 Factory Act that Lord Shaftesbury pushed through Parliament to end child labour in the U.K.. It wasn’t true then and it isn’t now! Let us display the same steadfast integrity as Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, John Newton and Lord Shaftesbury in opposing evil in our world and may our obedience to Christ Jesus make us useful to him and to our neighbours – nearby and far away. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Sydney Carter, who also wrote ‘Lord of the dance’, ‘When I needed a neighbour were you there?’ and sketches for Michael Flanders and Donald Swann’s “At the drop of a hat” reviews in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, he wrote a hit song, ‘A last cigarette’ for Sheila Hancock. He was a very talented man, both in his secular and spiritual writing. We shall sing hymn number 476, ‘One more step along the world I go’.

**1. One more step along the world I go,
One more step along the world I go;
From the old things to the new
Keep me travelling along with you: Chorus:
*And it’s from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.***

**2. Round the corner of the world I turn,
More and more about the world I learn;
All the new things that I see
You’ll be looking at along with me: Chorus:**

**3. As I travel through the bad and good,
Keep me travelling the way I should;
Where I see no way to go
You’ll be telling me the way, I know: Chorus:**

**4. Give me courage when the world is rough,
Keep me loving though the world is tough;
Leap and sing in all I do,
Keep me travelling along with you: Chorus:**

**5. You are older than the world can be,
You are younger than the life in me;
Ever old and ever new,
Keep me travelling along with you: *Chorus***

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Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.