Home Service Sheet For 4th July 2021

Call to Worship:                        Psalm 31:19-24

19 Oh, how abundant is your goodness,
    which you have stored up for those who fear you
and worked for those who take refuge in you,
    in the sight of the children of mankind!
20 In the cover of your presence you hide them
    from the plots of men;
you store them in your shelter
    from the strife of tongues.
21 Blessed be the Lord,
    for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
    when I was in a besieged city.
22 I had said in my alarm,
    “I am cut off from your sight.”
But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy
    when I cried to you for help.
23 Love the Lord, all you his saints!
    The Lord preserves the faithful
    but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.
24 Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
    all you who wait for the Lord!

Gracious and loving God, today, and every day, is all about You, and what You have done. Please help us worship You with an undistracted heart and mind now. You know how we can become distracted by worries, thoughts of others and other things alike. Help us put those thoughts away and focus on You and Your glory. May we exalt Your Holy Name in this time of worship, praying, singing and listening to Your Word. In Jesus’ Name we ask this, amen.

Read or Sing By Faith, written by Stuart Townend, Keith and Kristen Getty
<https://youtu.be/oEUskp1e2bg>

By faith, we see the hand of God
In the light of creation’s grand design;
In the lives of those who prove His faithfulness,
Who walk by faith and not by sight.

By faith, our fathers roamed the earth
With the power of His promise in their hearts
Of a holy city built by God’s own hand –
A place where peace and justice reign.

We will stand as children of the promise,
We will fix our eyes on Him, our soul’s reward.
Till the race is finished and the work is done,
We’ll walk by faith and not by sight.

By faith, the prophets saw a day
When the longed-for Messiah would appear
With the power to break the chains of sin and death,
And rise triumphant from the grave.

By faith, the church was called to go
In the power of the Spirit to the lost
To deliver captives and to preach good news,
In every corner of the earth.

By faith, this mountain shall be moved
And the power of the gospel shall prevail,
For we know in Christ all things are possible
For all who call upon His name.

Bible Reading                   Galatians 4:21-31

21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. 23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. 24 Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written,

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
    break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
    than those of the one who has a husband.”

28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. 30 But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” 31 So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Over the past several verses, Paul has been contrasting life under the law, with life as sons of God, or as he puts it elsewhere, life in, or with, the Spirit. Paul had preached the Gospel of Grace to the Galatians and they had responded with faith. They had been dead in sin, but by faith they had then been made alive in Jesus, co-heirs with Him. However, under the false teaching of those who came after Paul, they were returning to the slavery of the law, which leads to death and hell. Paul shows them exactly what they were doing, writing that they “desire to be under the law”.

The illustration that Paul goes on to use is firmly rooted in the Old Testament, and specifically Genesis. Abraham, the great father of faith was given the covenant promise of many descendants, but after a while he grew impatient and tried to help things along naturally. With the agreement of his wife, Sarah, he slept with her Egyptian servant, Hagar, and she went on to bear him a son, Ishmael. Surely he would be the child of God’s promise? Sadly, though, Abraham had not waited and trusted God’s perfect timing and providence. The child of God’s promise was to come later, born of Abraham’s wife, Sarah (see Genesis chapters 17, 18 and 21).

In verse 24, we read Paul writing “this may be interpreted allegorically”. The English translation here is a little misleading as this is an account of historical events with its own meaning and context. Yes, it also foreshadows another message, which is what Paul is referring to here, but it is also true in itself. Generally speaking, we get into all kinds of problems when we try to allegorise God’s Word, and so we should avoid doing it. What God literally said, God literally meant! Perhaps we would do better to understand Paul’s contrast of Sarah and Hagar as another illustration, rather than an allegory.

Hagar is described as being “in slavery with her children” in verse 25. If people continue to live under the law, believing that they can do enough in their own efforts to be right with God, then they are enslaved like Hagar and Ishmael. Such slavery leads to the same fate as that experienced by Hagar – “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” (v.30) Those who trust in themselves and in their own efforts to obey the law will be cast out into the outer darkness of hell forever.

It is easy to see Hagar and Ishmael as victims to be pitied, but that is not God’s perspective that He has revealed in His Word. They are not His chosen people, and in fact they ridicule and persecute His Church. What do I mean by this? In verse 29, Paul writes, “just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.” Those who are enslaved under the law are jealous of those who are freed by the death of Jesus on the cross. Those who stand condemned in their sin hate those who are adopted children of God, and the example of Hagar and Ishmael is a powerful one (see Genesis 16:4-5, and Genesis 21:9 for examples of this).

The overall point of Paul’s contrasts in chapter 4 is made really clear at the start of the next chapter. Verse 1 reads, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Under the law, with Hagar as our mother, being like Ishmael, being associated with the earthly Jerusalem we were in big trouble, dead in our sin. However, through the death of Jesus Christ for us we have been freed from the curse of the law, and adopted into God’s family as children of promise. We are to stand firm in Christ by faith, looking to Him and what He has done for us. If we rely upon ourselves and our own actions instead, we become enslaved under the law once again, and suffer its dire consequences of death and hell. Let us all keep our focus on Jesus and walk by faith with God’s Holy Spirit! Amen!

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, we come to You today with our prayers for Your world, Your Church and ourselves. Graciously hear us, we pray:
•       Gracious God, we pray for governments, monarchs and others in positions of power and authority. Grant to them wisdom and compassion, that they might make good decisions. May they seek the good of all peoples and nations.
•       Gracious God, we pray for all who are ill at this time. Grant to them Your healing and peace in the midst of their infirmities and pain. We also think of family members and friends who support them and care for them. May You give them the strength, patience and compassion they need to stand alongside them. Lord, we pray also for medical professionals and other carers who seek to bring relief for those who suffer.
•       Gracious God, we pray for Your Church throughout the world. In Your Word, You said that You will build Your Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. In the midst of persecution, apathy and false teaching, strengthen Your people. Grant wisdom, courage and strength to each member of Your Church, Oh Lord, so that the Gospel would be fearlessly proclaimed throughout this world.
•       Gracious God, we pray also for ourselves. Conform us to the image of Your Son, evermore each day. May we walk in step with Your Holy Spirit, and produce the fruit of Your Spirit in our lives. Lord, we desire to bring You glory through the lives we live each day.
Heavenly Father, graciously hear our prayer, for we ask it in Jesus’ Name, amen!

Blessing

Lord God, we rejoice in Your greatness and power, Your gentleness and love, Your mercy and justice. Enable us, by Your Spirit, to honour You in our thoughts, and words and actions, and to serve you in every aspect of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.