

Third prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Psalm 137:7-9)

Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell.

'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!'

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,

happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.

Happy is the one who seizes your infants

and dashes them against the rocks.

These verses are what is known as 'imprecatory' writing. They begin with a cry for the Lord (the king of Zion) to remember. How content the Psalm-writer and the Israelites with him will be if what the Edomites did to the people of Jerusalem were meted out to the Babylonians and their offspring. 'Psalm 137 has the distinction of having one of the most beloved opening lines and the most horrifying closing line of any psalm' (Clifford) In the speaking out, the Psalm-writer gives voice to the pain, the feelings of helplessness, and the burning anger. 'In speaking out to God, we give the pain, the helplessness, and the burning anger to God. And we trust that God's justice will be done' (Nancy DeClaisé-Walford). If you are angry or bitter about things, offer them to God. He will administer justice.

O come, thou Key of David, come, / And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the say that leads on high, / And close the path to misery.

Fourth prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Isaiah 51:11)

Those the Lord has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;

everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them,

and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw the return from Babylon to Israel and to Jerusalem. Those returning would rejoice in the Lord, the God of their rescue of their salvation. Singing, gladness and joy are important parts of what it means to be a Christian. We are to sing 'a new song' (Psalm 98:1). A 'new song' presupposes 'an old song'. Old songs are songs celebrating creation—the Bible doesn't say to stop singing these. But it does command us to sing new songs—find a Psalm, a hymn, a worship song that is about salvation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and victory in his resurrection and, with all your heart, offer it to God.

O come, thou Day-spring, come and cheer / Our spirits by thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, / And death's dark shadows put to flight:



The Eighth Day! (3) 29-30 November 2020

Introduction

*What is God saying to us during this second period of Corona-virus lockdown?
What do we as individuals, as a church, as a nation, want to say to God?*

More than 30 years ago, for it was when I was in my first circuit, the Methodist Church published a short leaflet about fasting and prayer. Believing that this was a biblical practice and something which had been a great blessing to the early Methodists, in the larger of my two churches we began organising regular days of fasting and prayer but then I moved to a new circuit and I must admit it has been a practice that I have neglected.

Two years ago, while on holiday in Northern Ireland, we were warmly welcomed to the *Transformation Centre*, Lisburn, by Pastor Nick Serb, his wife and family. It had been an encouraging morning service (Pastor Nick had preached powerfully on Romans 1) and we were pleased to share time with them. Earlier this year, Pastor Nick, who is from Romania, sent me a first draft of a book he is writing on Fasting and Prayer. It is an excellent book and I have been privileged to work through it and offer little corrections to Pastor Nick's excellent English, and make comments and suggestions, which he has graciously received.

One of the joys of lockdown (yes there have been some!) is to watch my college friend, Revd Steven Wild, each day as he presents his *Daily Reflections* on YouTube. Steve is working his way through the Sermon on the Mount and he spoke with some enthusiasm about Fasting and Prayer. On the day that the Prime Minister spoke to the nation and said we must endure a second lockdown I felt convinced that it was right to call the people of the Torbay Methodist Circuit and others who share in fellowship with us to a time of Fasting and Prayer.

I am sorry that *Think: Fasting and Prayer (A Seven Day Journey)* by Pastor Nick Serb will not be printed until 2021. However, I freely acknowledge that some of the ideas that I share here are drawn from Pastor Nick's book—but, of course, he is not responsible for what I am writing. I chose 'The Eighth Day' because over the years people have made the excuse that they would have joined in something but it was on the wrong day. The Eighth Day is one day later each week! It is also the day of resurrection and of new beginnings.

It was in about 1970 that I heard Duncan Campbell preach in the Bethel Mission, Plymouth. The auditorium was the Little Theatre. I was about 12 years old at the time but I remember the dodderly old man being enlivened as he spoke and the hall, which was well-filled with rowdy youths, falling strangely still. It is said that the revival in Christian faith in the Isle of Lewis, in the Hebrides, can be traced to the prayers of two elderly ladies.

<https://cntp.uk/other-insights/the-intercessors-of-the-hebrides-revival/>

Fasting is the discipline of going without food for a (short) period of time. The invitation is to join with members of the Torbay Methodist Circuit and other friends to go without food from 10.00 pm one evening until 4.00 pm the following day. **You must not do this if it involves any health risk, you have an underlying health condition, are a diabetic or need to take medication with food.** If one or more factors prevents you from fasting you can still pray and you might choose to go without treats (such as biscuits or chocolate) for the duration of the fast. Also, if you would rather go from 6.00 pm until noon the following day then that is fine. **Most importantly, you should continue to have plenty to drink during the period of fasting and prayer. It is definitely not honouring to God to make yourself ill.**

What is the point of fasting and prayer?

It is a spiritual discipline to show yourself and God you are truly serious about the things you are praying for—it gives time normally spent having meals and snacks to focus on prayer and your relationship with God. At these times, be sure still to have a cup of tea/coffee and/or a glass of water/juice. If you need food with medication then have a small piece of toast or a couple of plain biscuits. People fasting from 10.00 pm until 4.00 pm often have four times in the day that they would think about eating something—breakfast, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon. Use these or four similar times to share in 15 minutes of prayer, reading, praise and ministry.

Notes by John Haley

First prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Psalm 137:1-3)

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

Sunday is not a day for fasting—it is a day of celebration! But that Monday-morning feeling follows soon after. The Psalm remembers Israel (Judah) in Babylon—and the taunts of the Babylonians. Modern football fans hate the opposition reminding them of impending defeat—'you're not singing anymore!' It's equivalent to the critic who, only in the bad times, will ask, 'Where is your God now?' Sometimes it's hard for Christians to 'live in the victory', both personally and in the church (especially in the current age of church decline in Europe and the Western World). We pray for things to be different in the hope and realisation that they will be.

O come, O come, Immanuel / And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here / Until the Son of God appear.

Second prayer-time

Scripture Passage (Psalm 137:4-6)

*How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.*

Boney M's record with the words of vv. 1-4 became one of the top ten hits of all time. From the previous Psalms (135, 136) it seems that the Jews have been allowed home—but the pain of the exile is very much with them. Many believers struggle to deal with painful memories—some which were not their fault and others which were self-inflicted. God can bring healing to even our most painful memories. As a surgeon cannot work on someone in full body-armour so we need to trust God and be ready to open our hearts and minds to him in prayer, and ask him to touch those areas of our life.

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free / Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell thy people save, / And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.