

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Two Prayers: June 24th

The prayer of Manasses King of Iuda, when he was held captive in Babylon..

O Lord, Almighty God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of their righteous seed; who hast made heaven and earth, with all the ornament thereof; who hast bound the sea by the word of thy commandment; who hast shut up the deep, and sealed it by thy terrible and glorious name; whom all men fear, and tremble before thy power; for the majesty of thy glory cannot be borne, and thine angry threatening toward sinners is importable: but thy merciful promise is unmeasurable and unsearchable; for thou art the most high Lord, of great compassion, longsuffering, very merciful, and repentest of the evils of men. Thou, O Lord, according to thy great goodness hast promised repentance and forgiveness to them that have sinned against thee: and of thine infinite mercies hast appointed repentance unto sinners, that they may be saved. Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance to the just, as to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but thou hast appointed repentance unto me that am a sinner: for I have sinned above the number of the sands of the sea. My transgressions, O Lord, are multiplied: my transgressions are multiplied, and I am not worthy to behold and see the height of heaven for the multitude of mine iniquities. I am bowed down with many iron bands, that I cannot lift up mine head, neither have any release: for I have provoked thy wrath, and done evil before thee: I did not thy will, neither kept I thy commandments: I have set up abominations, and have multiplied offences. Now therefore I bow the knee of mine heart, beseeching thee of grace. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I acknowledge mine iniquities: wherefore, I humbly beseech thee, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me, and destroy me not with mine iniquities. Be not angry with me for ever, by reserving evil for me; neither condemn me to the lower parts of the earth. For thou art the God, even the God of them that repent; and in me thou wilt shew all thy goodness: for thou wilt save me, that am unworthy, according to thy great mercy. Therefore I will praise thee for ever all the days of my life: for all the powers of the heavens do praise thee, and thine is the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

You probably won't find this prayer in your Bible, even if your Bible follows the older tradition of including not just the Old and New Testament books, but the Apocrypha. You will find it in the Common Worship Prayer book as a canticle. It has a long history as a penitential prayer, used by both Jews and Christians. The King whose name it carries does appear in all Bibles – in Chronicles and in Kings – as one of the worst of the Kings; but, in one

version, as a King who repented and was restored. There isn't a better change of heart prayer. The history of the prayer is a bit obscure, but we think it was written in Greek long after the time of the King whose name it carries,

Some issues to think about: Can God forgive every sin? (This King apparently sacrificed children to the gods.) Is repentance enough, or does the penitent have to "make amends"? What New Testament stories/sayings do we base our ideas of forgiveness on? What is hardest: forgiving someone or feeling forgiven ourselves? A Church of England vicar resigned because she felt unable to forgive someone who had done something dreadful to her family: do you sympathise? In the wake of terrorist attacks, e.g. in Northern Ireland and in France, and in the wake of the Holocaust, some quite extraordinary gifts of forgiveness were offered: could we do that? Is forgetting different from forgiving? How do you feel about the different ways of saying sorry: privately to God in your own private prayers; personal confession in the presence of a priest (still to God, and it is God who forgives); the general confession in the course of the service (no out loud details required)? Is it just being human to sin, say sorry, and do the same thing again (e.g. losing your temper)?

Habakkuk Chapter 3: This prayer by the poet/prophet with the unusual name bids fair to be the most memorable prayer in the Bible. It is to be savoured as much as discussed, perhaps especially the section in which the writer senses God's loving presence even when his world is falling about his ears.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 The Message (MSG)
17-19 Though the cherry trees don't blossom
and the strawberries don't ripen,
Though the apples are worm-eaten
and the wheat fields stunted,
Though the sheep pens are sheepless
and the cattle barns empty,
I'm singing joyful praise to GOD.
I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God.
Counting on GOD's Rule to prevail,
I take heart and gain strength.
I run like a deer.
I feel like I'm king of the mountain!

(For congregational use, with a full orchestra.)

The period when this was written was when the Babylonian Empire was looming up as an even greater threat than Assyria had been. The destruction of the Temple and exile were not far away.

Habakkuk is saying that God is the God of today and tomorrow, and not just the God of the Exodus. Our God is the God of Jesus, and although the earthly life of Jesus was a very long time ago, we ought to have an even firmer starting point for trust than Habakkuk?