

If God is for Us ...
26 July 2020
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Let us go to God in prayer:

Almighty God,

Our guide in ages past and our hope for the ages to come: We give thanks, that you have given us the ability to choose the Spirit of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as our shepherd. We concede that we choose our own path along the shoreline of Galilee, as we look for our destiny. We look back at our history and remember the "Pillar of Fire" that led your people out of the Sinai Desert. In those days, Galilee's shoreline was nowhere to be seen. Jesus of Nazareth had yet to grace the manger in salvation's Bethlehem cradle.

Help us look to the heavens for the brilliance of the Sun's fire reflecting on the clouds along the path Your Son charts for our day-to-day journey.

May we discover that the guidelines You share with us through Your Scripture's Living Words, will help us make decisions that will bring glory to heaven and earth. For we know in our hearts and in our minds the that faith, hope and love we share today with be magnified by the grace and mercy of our Lord, who leads us home. Amen

Psalm 105:1-6 (GNT) – ¹Give thanks to the Lord, proclaim his greatness; tell the nations what he has done. ²Sing praise to the Lord; tell the wonderful things he has done. ³Be glad that we belong to him; let all who worship him rejoice. ⁴Go to the Lord for help; and worship him continually. ⁵⁻⁶You descendants of Abraham, his servant; you descendants of Jacob, the man he chose: remember the miracles that God performed and the judgments that he gave."

Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV) – ²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. ³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' (Psalm 44:22)

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Chosen People

Let's define who the "us" is first in Paul's verse 31b, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Historically, Abram was the first chosen and because of his faithfulness he became Abraham. God's promise was that his ancestors would be numbered like the stars in the sky. How many stars are there in the sky? You may not believe this, but someone has counted them, maybe with the help of a computer. There are 9,096 stars twinkling in the heavens, we call sky. However, that includes both the northern and the southern hemispheres. We can only see the northern half (4,548 stars) in the sky, with its North Star to tell us where we are, as we rotate around the Sun at any time. The other half of the stars live in the southern half of the sky, with its Southern Cross to tell "The Southerners" where they are, as they rotate around the Sun at any time. However, what stars we see in our sky, no matter where we live on Planet Earth, are like minute quarks on the smallest pinhead in God's Universe! It's estimated that there are a billion trillion (21 zeros) stars in the Universe that we can observe with the aid of the Hubble telescope and other scientific aids. Our star, the Sun, is in the Milky Way Galaxy. Astronomers believe (guesstimate) there are about 100 thousand million stars in the Milky Way. Yet, even the

Astronomers have no clue as to how many galaxies there are in the Universe beyond that – they believe there are millions upon millions of other galaxies beyond the Milky Way!

The more stars we try to count or acknowledge, the smaller Abraham and his descendants seem, wandering in the desert. We should count ourselves as some of the smaller ones wandering on the “pinhead” of our terrestrial landscape. The question is, do our footprints really matter? What Paul is trying to say to the people in Rome, the Manhattan of yesterday, is that each and every person matters to God – “If God is for us, who is against us?” Abraham was the beginning of a chosen people, ironically, made up of Hebrews and Arabs, which should warn us about how off-base we have become in understanding who “Chosen People” are in the eyes of God. By the time of Paul’s letter, the accepted definition of “Chosen People” was those of the Christian Faith. That was actually a remarkable transformation from Abraham’s family to the Hebrews, to the Israelites, to the Jewish nation and today’s acceptance of the “Chosen People” being the Christian Nations. I mean this in a positive way, for it is a sign of the Spirit of Jesus Christ at work in the world with a prayer to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Think about the positive energy and motivation it must have given our military as we fought the Axis Powers during World War II. Even in our everyday lives it gives us courage and encourages us to live as “One Nation under God.” Sometimes we forget that. But I want to talk about the “Chosen People” from a different direction – from the direction that God chooses people from God’s time and space, not ours.

Included Instead of Excluded

When we read or say, “God so loved the world ...” We should believe God doesn’t use qualifiers to elect who to love or who is called to service. It is this “sinful” humanity that puts qualifiers on who is chosen by God and even what God chooses them to do. Verse 33 says, “³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.” Not only does God justify, but God also cradles us in loving arms filled with grace and mercy. We should all remember salvation’s Bethlehem cradle holding the new-born Jesus of Nazareth. God created and loves us all. The problem is that sometimes we forget (or never learn) to love ourselves. If we can’t love ourselves, how can we believe God loves us? How can we love God? When theologians used the term “the Elect” they used it as a categorizing (or labeling) term exclusively pointing to those they identified as God’s “Chosen (special) People.” In reality, my God has the insight and foreknowledge to choose anyone inside the Christian Faith or outside Christianity to do work for the Kingdom of Heaven. God wants to include all the people of Planet Earth, while we observe, analyze and exclude all those who disagree or are different.

The Image in God’s Eyes

There was a time in my life,
when I despised the image
staring back from my mirror.
Sometimes, a spark would glow,
but more often than not,
my past saw yesterdays
filled with despair
or at best – confusion.
On the good days,
I would barely see
what appeared to be
a shadowed echo of a pathetic me –
appearing before a dimly lit mirror.
Today, I stand face to face,
looking at the shine of silvered glass.
Thank God,
what I clearly see is not a sad illusion
glaring back at me.
My Picasso twisted upside down
has become a treasured masterpiece.
My looking glass of life long lost –
has become a two-way mirror,
with the eyes of God

reflecting an image back
of a smiling me. gab

In the poem, I say, “My Picasso twisted upside down has become a treasured masterpiece.” My painting of myself was as twisted and distorted as a Picasso masterpiece. This is only my unprofessional opinion, as I am not a professional art critic, but I sometimes wonder if Picasso’s paintings have reached masterpiece status because in this “sinful society” distorted view of reality. Reality should be a level above us that we can strive for with God’s help. I believe the new society we make should always reflect a greater inclusiveness in the world God loves. Now, during this distorted time of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have a responsibility as people of God to show love not hate. Verse 37 begins with the phrase, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors ...” through our God who loves us. Conquerors write tomorrow’s history. But if we are to be more than oppressive conquerors, then tomorrow’s history can’t be a distorted history that excludes anyone from having the “free will” choice to accept the love and guidance of God. When Jesus said to turn the other cheek, it was not a passive response, it was a proactive response – walk the extra mile – with nonviolent actions. Jesus taught us over and over again to love one another, so I ask can there be a more sacred response to violence, than to love one another?

The real mark
of bravery
and courage,
is to stand tall
and proud
in the
midst of turmoil
–
to face the winds
of destruction
with the spirit
that can only be
given to us
by God. gab

I have had a special honor during my time of service in the Malcom Randall VAMC. In the early nineties, I was called by a social worker who was leading a support group of former POWs (Prisoners of War -- XPOWs) from World War II. The majority of the XPOWs were in their early 70’s. In those days, it was not an honor to be “labeled” a POW. Other members of the military, veterans and society looked down on POWs and many considered their service tainted, at the very least, by their capture. My uncle, James Earl LaRoe, was a POW at Camp O'Donnell in the Philippines after surviving the Bataan Death March. He was held in the prison camp for over two years. The Japanese loaded over 1700 POWs on an unmarked merchant freighter (history has labeled them “Hell Ships”) to take them to forced-labor camps in Japanese occupied territories. His “Hell Ship” was sunk by an American submarine. My parents would tell us about the uncle who died on a “Hell Ship” sunk during World War II. They never mentioned that he was a prisoner of war for all those months. Society questioned along with the military, “How could a POW be honored with all the other heroes of the “Greatest Generation?”

The cold hard reality was that if you were killed or wounded by the enemy you were awarded the Purple Heart. However, this excluded all POWs from being eligible, if they were wounded or killed while in captivity. Finally, in 1996 as part of the National Defense Authorization Act, Congress passed legislation making those wounded or injured during captivity before April 25, 1962 eligible. However, it was four more years, on 12 September 2000, before Former American Prisoners of War were eligible to receive the Purple Heart medal due to a little-publicized change in the award rules. Now, finally, the Nation realized that even trauma to the mind was injury caused by the enemy. Working with POWs gave me insight into the unfair ways we often treat our heroes who step forward to serve. As a Vietnam veteran, I saw the same attitude of labeled exclusion applied to those of us who chose to serve. Even to this day many still don’t acknowledge or understand that being a POW caused trauma to the veteran’s body, mind and soul. For most of the POW veterans in the VA’s support group, it was a long drive to the hospital. Their younger wives would drive them to the hospital and then wait sometimes for hours while their husbands were receiving care.

When the social worker called about the POWs, he asked if I would be willing to start a support group for the wives. After about two years the POWs, their wives and those of us who were VA staff all agreed that the support group would be more beneficial to the veterans and their families, if we all met together. From that moment on everyone was included and no one was excluded. We all benefited from the togetherness. I can honestly say that my experience with the POWs and their families became one of the most precious gifts I have received from my years working with the VA. The best example I can share happened on 6 October 2019, when the social worker and I were invited to celebrate the 100th birthday of one of the wives of our POW group. One of the other wives was also in attendance, and I had done the funeral for both their husbands.

Those experiences and one more helped me form and write my own personal definition of who a hero is in today's world. The World War II POWs always felt like the Government chose the wrong day for POW/MIA day. For them the middle of April always seemed more appropriate. The majority of POWs held by the Germans were liberated from the 1st through the 15th of April in 1945. In the nineties we held three "Liberation Sunday Celebrations" to honor them as heroes and to give them a Homecoming Celebration. So, who are heroes? For a moment, I ask you to think about the Apostles and the early church in downtown Jerusalem. What if they had stayed huddled in their church? What if they never went to the suburbs or beyond? What if Paul had quit his mission with his first shipwreck? What if Paul had not encouraged the Christians to gather in Churches across Greece and Turkey? What if Paul and the other Apostles had never traveled to Rome? What if we had no Bibles to reveal the living Word of God? The early Christians had an impossible task. We've had heroes take the crucial steps on the Galilee Path before us. They completed their task to spread the Good News of the Gospel even with considerable pain and anguish to their bodies, minds and souls. Now we are called to step forward and take the next crucial steps to be the sowers of the Good News seeds today. This quote was used to define a hero in everyday terms:

A hero
is someone
faced with an impossible task
that steps forward
and completes
that task even at considerable pain
to their spirit. gab

Who will separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.?

Paul writes to Rome in verses 38 and 39, ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

If you read Romans chapter 8 carefully, the answer becomes apparent. The answer, sadly, is only "you" and "I" can separate ourselves from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our greatest gift at creation was that we were made in God's image. We built walls around us, documented repeatedly in the Old Testament to separate ourselves from God. But the walls came tumbling down, when Jesus died on the Cross for the forgiveness of our sin. Now the greatest gift of creation has been surpassed by the greatest gift of all eternity, the Holy Spirit, which our Lord Jesus Christ promised will be with us always. When we let our spirit meet God's Spirit in Christ, we discover that we can know God, yesterday, today and for all our tomorrows. Therefore, we are now predestined to never be separated from God. It is the destiny of God's people and we are bound for the Kingdom of Heaven. We all become God's chosen people when we choose God, because God has already chosen us.

