

First Sunday in Lent

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

Joachim Neander, 1680; transl by Catherine Winkworth, 1863

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near;
Praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who over all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
Hast thou not seen how thy desires e'er have been
Granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
If with His love He befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, who with marvelous wisdom hath made thee,
Decked thee with health and with loving hand guided and stayed thee.
How oft in grief hath not He brought thee relief,
Spreading His wings to o'ershade thee!

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore Him!
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before Him.
Let the Amen sound from His people again,
Gladly fore'er we adore Him.

The forty days of exclude Sundays. Sundays are never fast days; they are always a feast day. Every Sunday is a mini-celebration of Easter and a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come, the marriage supper of the Lamb. Thus the readings for Sundays in this devotional are hymns of praise.

Included in this week's readings is Psalm 51, a prayer of confession by King David, composed in response to conviction of his sin. David sees his brokenness, acknowledges his need for cleansing, and desires for God to blot out his sin and restore him to Himself. It is the prayer of a broken and contrite heart, a heart that knows it is stained and that longs for the joy of salvation. This psalm is a guide for our own confession. We, like David, have sinned and done what is evil in the Lord's sight, but we take heart: because of the cross and the empty tomb, we may boldly confess our sin and claim the salvation found in Christ alone.

Monday

What About Fasting?

"What are you giving up for Lent?" is a common question this time of year. This makes sense, as Lent, traditionally, is a season of fasting. Perhaps a better question, though, is "Why are you giving up for Lent?" What is the reason behind these forty days of self-denial? Fasting is certainly not a requirement, and it is not asceticism for its own sake. Rather, fasting is a spiritual practice.

Lent is a time of repentance. It is a time to examine ourselves and, by God's grace, clear out sin, like a spring-cleaning for our souls. When we fast, several things happen. First, we hunger for that which we do not have. This physical desire is intended to point us to our spiritual need. We are reminded to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to long for God. Secondly, fasting, whether from food or drink or an activity, creates time and space in our lives. How will we fill this gap? We turn towards God and his Word, for only He can truly satisfy.

When we fast, we enter into the season thoughtfully and with prayer. Lent is often seen as a time for a "religious diet" or an opportunity to break a bad habit, but we limit ourselves by focusing solely on this negative aspect. This season is an opportunity for spiritual growth and practice. Is there something in our lives that may be keeping us from God and His Word? Is there something we can give up, simply because Jesus is better?

One final thought: traditionally, money saved by fasting is marked for charity. In this way, Lent is a time to turn away from ourselves to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Notes:

Tuesday

Isaiah 58: 3-12 (ESV)

'Why have we fasted, and You see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and You take no knowledge of it?'
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?
"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'
If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

Wednesday

Psalm 51 (ESV)

Have mercy upon me, O God,
 according to Your steadfast love;
according to Your abundant mercy
 blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
 and cleanse me from my sin!
For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is ever before me.
Against You, You only, have I sinned,
 and done what is evil in Your sight,
so that You may be justified in Your words
 and blameless in Your judgment.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
 and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being,
 and You teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
 let the bones that You have broken rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins,
 and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
 and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Your presence,
 and take not Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
 and uphold me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
 and sinners will return to You.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
 O God of my salvation,
 and my tongue will sing aloud of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
 and my mouth will declare Your praise.
For You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
 You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
 a broken and contrite spirit, O God, You will not despise.
Do good to Zion in Your good pleasure;
 build up the walls of Jerusalem;
then will You delight in right sacrifices,
 in burnt offerings and whole offerings;
 then bulls will be offered on Your altar.

Thursday

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Isaac Watts, 1707

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Notes:

Friday

Isaiah 53: 1- 6 (ESV)

Who has believed what they heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For He grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him,
and no beauty that we should desire Him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.
Surely He has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on Him
the iniquity of us all.

Saturday

Almighty and Most Merciful Father,
We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against Thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.
But Thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare Thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore Thou those who are penitent, according to Thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, O most merciful Father, for His sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of Thy holy name. Amen.

- *Book of Common Prayer, 1662; The Book of Common Worship, 1946*