



CHRISTIAN LITERATURE FUND
CHRISTELIKE LEKTUURFONDS

Week of Prayer 2017

Set free by God who gives hope

Topics

1. *Day 1:* Christ set us free and gives us hope (**Galatians 5:1-13**) – Helené Fouché
2. *Day 2:* Our hope in heaven let us pray for each other (**Colossians 1:3-14**) – Akash Sirpal
3. *Day 3:* Set free to worship Jesus who is with us always (Matthew 28:16-20; **Isaiah 43:1-5**) – Derik Myburgh
4. *Day 4:* Set free to live from God's promises (**Psalm 50:1-6, 14-15**) – Henco van der Westhuizen
5. *Day 5:* As free people we serve one another with the gospel (**2 Kings 5:1-14** [A 'n Minor aged war victim serves the agressor with good news]) – Myrtle Joubert
6. *Day 6:* As free people we serve God to whom all things belong (**Psalm 24**; Colossians 1:15-20) – Ntozakhe Cezula

Introduction

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you have a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way ..." (Colossians 1:9-10a). Paul prayed for the faithful in Colossae from the prison in Rome. He received witness about their faith in Christ Jesus, and about their love for all the faithful servants of Christ. Paul gives thanks to the Lord for this. He also heard about people who proclaimed a false gospel by which they confused the faithful with teachings about all kinds of religious rules to complement the saving work of Christ. Paul emphasises the supremacy of the Son and prays for this faith community who was founded by Epaphras. Paul did not visit this community yet. His prayer motivates the believers to keep faithful in a confusing and troubled world.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians we find different elements of the faithful Christian prayer. The first element is the fact *that Paul prays to God*. The whole letter witnesses to *an integrated prayer life*. A second element is that of *thanksgiving*. Paul gives thanks to the Lord for this congregation and for God's involvement in their life and ministry. A third element of Paul's prayer is that of *intercession*. He prays that God will give them wisdom so that they can live to God's glory, as well as to persevere in their service to God. Chapter 4 deals with a fourth element. Paul motivates the faithful *to persevere in prayer*, by being watchful and thankful. As a fifth element Paul asks the Colossians to *also pray for him*. They should pray for open doors to proclaim the gospel, as well as for him to be clear in bringing the gospel to others. Finally Paul closes his letter with the *prayer of peace* for the congregation.

We have here important perspectives on prayer from a single letter of Paul to a congregation of Jesus Christ. Let us keep this in mind when we bow before our Lord in prayer during the 2017 Week of Prayer and even after that. Our world today is no less challenging than that of the congregation in Colossae of Paul's day. We need the prayers of one another and should encourage each other to pray to God all through the year.

For the prayer sessions over the six days of the 2017 Week of Prayer, we link onto the *Reformation 500 Celebrations in 2017*. Worldwide, Protestant believers will celebrate the 16th century Reformation in the church. This prayer series employs the theme chosen by the DRC Family of Churches for the Reformation 500 Celebrations: *Set free*. One of the main focusses of the Reformation was the rediscovery that God set humanity free by grace through Jesus Christ. We were set free from sin and guilt, free from paralysing moralism, free from the enslavement to oppressing systems. We were also set free for a life in which we can serve God, our neighbour and the whole of creation, with joy and responsibility. "You, beloved, were called to be free", Paul wrote to the congregation in Galatians 5:13a. This also applies to us. Now we can approach God with boldness in prayer to entrust the year 2017 to the Lord.

May the Lord graciously and lovingly hear our collective prayers and supplications.

We thank Helené Foché (DRC), Akash Sirpal (RCA), Henco van der Westhuizen (DRC), Derick Myburgh (URCSA), Myrtle Joubert (URCSA) and Ntozakhe Simon Cezula (URCSA), members of the United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family, who wrote the guidelines for the prayer week. May the Lord bless the 2017 Week of Prayer abundantly.

Eddie Orsmond, Donald Gantana (On behalf of the Task Group of the United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family)

Vantage Points of the writers

The following points undergird the drafting of the guidelines for the Week of Prayer 2017.

- The goal of the Week of Prayer is *to pray together*. We bring in prayer before God's face the work of the congregation and the church in our unity with the world church, for the year ahead.
- We deliberately choose to place our focus on prayer in the guidelines. The devotional guidelines are short in order to make more room for us to pray together. However, the guidelines should stimulate the thoughts on specific themes.
- Prayer is not one of a variety of spiritual activities among many others. Prayer is first and foremost a mindset and attitude that fills and determines our whole way of life. In our private room we ensure that we are focused on God, so that we may live focused on God in our public room. In this way our entire life becomes prayer.
- The Week of Prayer is an intensive "private room" for the congregation with a view to address the year with a deliberate focus on and commitment to God, in unity with brothers and sisters of all denominations of Christ's church. The prayer meetings wish to assist us, to be busy with God's things in such a way that God will always be in the center. Therefore openness and availability to God is emphasised.
- We present these guidelines in the form of meditations with some suggestions for prayer themes. The different authors of the guidelines each has their own approach in writing the guidelines. This approach introduced diversity for the six days of the prayer week.
- We focus consciously on the fact that the congregation and the church as the "body of Christ", continues Jesus' humanity in this world, in their 2017 service and ministry.

Our prayer is that the Lord will use the work of our congregations and broader church in 2017 to bring about the kingdom of heaven also on the earth.

Day 1: Christ set us free and gave us hope

Galatians 5:1-13

Helené Fouché

1. We have been set free.

Galatians 5 sets off two realities against one another, as it were. On the one hand a reality of slavery. That was why someone was circumcised and on that ground he (and his family) had to submit to the Law of Moses. The other reality is described by the word "free". The Law of Moses brought submission and slavery while Christ brings real absolution.

From the letter, we conclude that there were false doctrines that deluded people. In the process, the congregation was convinced that they had to do and maintain all sorts of things to earn their salvation.

The congregation was uncertain about which reality contained the truth about God's salvation: Was it in the keeping of the law and therefore in circumcision, or not? Their hope was that Paul would simplify their choice between the two realities. Hopefully, Paul could teach them what the truth was. However, the apostle surprised the congregation by telling them that being circumcised had no value. Circumcision as such didn't matter in the least. The law, circumcision, and other rituals and customs no longer held any redeeming value. They (and us) have been redeemed in Christ. In the same way redemption does not depend on circumcision.

True redemption lies in Christ. Nothing we can do can replace the value or meaning of what Christ has already done in obedience to God.

2. "Nothing, but grace."

Paul wanted to remind the congregation that there was nothing they could do to redeem themselves. "Nothing." He reminded them that only God's grace could set them free. Not the law, rituals, customs, or even circumcision could do that.

It was precisely the teachers of false doctrine that made it difficult for them to understand that they could do nothing to receive God's grace. It wasn't in accordance with the way they had always thought about the law and redemption.

In our societies, we often have preachers of heresy (or our own thoughts and convictions) who want to convince people that they can do certain things to accomplish redemption, or even that we must just be good enough in God's eye. However, without realising it, we then try to work out our own redemption. This way of thinking is almost the normal way we think about and understand redemption. It is in a way our default position.

But the message that Paul emphasises, is that there is nothing we can do to earn God's salvation. Salvation by God in Christ is grace alone (*sola gracia*).

3. God didn't call us to freedom that we may be villains.

The Galatian congregation struggled to understand and find the balance between freedom and obedience. Even today, we as followers of Christ, still struggle with this balance. When Christ sets us free from the law, we experience uncertainty because we feel insecure about what it would mean to live as obedient people. How can we ensure not to end up in moral anarchy?

Verse 6 reminds us of yet another of the reformatory *solas*: *sola fide* (only by faith). Through love, this faith becomes deeds. Verse 13 also reminds us to serve one another in love. The balance lies in the reality that faith in the grace of God can only be converted into deeds.

Freedom is never absolute, as Paul teaches us numerous times. It rather makes us slaves of one another. This form of slavery, however, is not the hierarchical orientated slavery of the world. This Christ-centered slavery is

radically different from the world's understanding thereof. In Christ we are equals, who serves one another within the community Christ brought about.

Nelson Mandela, who in his lifetime often dreamt, thought, talked and wrote about freedom, played an enormous role in making freedom a reality for many people in South Africa. He said: "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

We cannot be free ourselves, while other people are still enslaved or without freedom. We cannot free others (or introduce them to the freedom that Christ establishes), while we ourselves do not carry the liberating love of Jesus in our hearts and serve others in love.

4. God does not leave us alone.

We are called to live a Spirit-filled life. We are called to serve one another in love, based on the freedom that Christ offers us. Galatians 5:22 reminds us of the fruit of the Spirit we should produce through the freedom that God in Christ cultivates in us.

When we live Spirit-filled lives, other people will recognise the freedom that Christ brings.

5. Prayer themes:

- Thank God for the freedom He made possible for us through his Son Jesus Christ.
- Perhaps there are places in your life where you specifically become aware of Christ's freedom.
- Pray for people who have not yet realised how God's freedom can change their lives and thoughts.
- Intervene for them. Ask the Holy Spirit to open their thoughts.
- Dedicate the Church of Christ to God too.
- We have been called by Christ to show people how to live as people who have been set free.
- Our freedom in Christ urges us to let our love, through our faith, turn into deeds.
- Pray that the freedom we received in Christ, becomes real also for other people.

Day 2: Our hope in heaven lets us pray for each other

Colossians 1:3-14; Ezekiel 22:23-31; Isaiah 53:12

Akash Sirpal

1. Our hope in heaven motivates our thankfulness.

The hope of Heaven makes us happy and secure now, so that we can joyfully endure mistreatment here as we pursue righteousness. Matthew 5:10 shares this blessing with us: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This hope for heaven empowers us not only to live pure lives and making us fearless. It also helps us to pray for others.

As we come to our text, we notice that Paul gave continual thanks to God in his prayers. Early on in his letters, he began either with thanksgiving or with praise to God. So, it was natural that when Paul prayed for the church in Colossae, the prayer burst into an overflow of thankfulness.

Verse 3 starts off by saying that "we always thank God ..." This is a reference to his prayer life in the company of others, like Timothy with whom he regularly prayed. Wonderful things were taking place. However, instead of congratulating themselves for a job well done, or the Colossian Christians for their faith, they raised their voices in thanksgiving to the Heavenly Father.

2. What was the cause for Paul's gratitude?

First, Paul began with thanks to God for the faith of the Colossians. It refers to their trust in the Person and work of Christ. This formed the basis of that which brought them into a living relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Colossians' faith is defined as faith in Christ. Sometimes we have faith in faith. The focus should be faith that resides in Christ, not only the presence of faith.

Secondly, Paul thanks God for the love of the Colossians. It was a love being expressed toward all the saints. The focus is on the outworking of an active faith that is in Christ. It is the fruit and evidence of fellowship with the Lord Jesus through an active faith in His blessed life. The evangelist John, writes: "Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love" (John 15:1-9). And in 1 John 3:14 we read: "We know we have passed from death to life, because we love our brother."

Thirdly, Paul was thankful for the hope of the Colossians. The hope here is defined as that which is laid up for you in heaven. The place of storage is heaven, a place of security and protection where the corruption and sin of this present world cannot touch it. It includes the whole of our salvation: being in God's presence, at home with the Lord after death, eternal glory, and a future resurrected body, with eternal rewards.

3. How did the Colossians receive faith, hope and love?

They received it from the word of truth which is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is available to the whole world. The same gospel that went to Colossae is the gospel going around the world. It produced life and growth. It is alive, growing, spreading, bearing fruit. When the gospel is heard, and believed, lives change radically. Hear Paul's message: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

Paul felt able to commend the Colossians for their faith but this was not sufficient. That is why he moves from thanksgiving to petition. If we are to continue to please the Lord, bear fruit and grow in Christ, it is necessary that we be filled with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

4. You need to be filled with knowledge of his will (verse 9).

Essentially Paul prayed for two things that his readers might have: full knowledge of the will of God, and, thus they might live in a manner worthy of the Lord. Both requests are bound up with each other and this request forms the objective of prayer. It points us to the great need in every believer's life and how this need is met.

All of us need to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. However, it is not any chosen means that will accomplish this knowledge. We can never fill this void through human wisdom. "... so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ ..." (Colossians 2:2-3). In his letter to the Romans Paul writes: "... the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (1:18).

5. Live a life worthy (verse 10).

In the Christian life, knowledge and obedience go together. There is no separation between learning and living. The wisdom about which Paul prayed was not simply head knowledge of deep spiritual truths. True spiritual knowledge must affect daily life. Christ must be our source of change. Today too, spiritual change or moral behaviour is sought through some form of asceticism, legalism, doing good or some means of work. The idea Paul has in mind, is that our walk must be the kind that brings credit to the grace of God in Christ. That is the legacy of the Reformation. "... so, that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive" (Titus 2:9-10).

6. Please him in every way (verse 10).

As we seek to live the Christian life by God's grace, it is important to keep in mind the goal of pleasing the Lord and bringing honour to Him. People often want to know how to be more spiritual or more pious, but the underlying goal must be to know God more and to please Him. From the latter part of verse 10, the apostle then expands on this knowledge of God with a series of clauses that expand the idea of a worthy walk.

7. Prayer themes:

- Lord, help us to overflow with thankfulness in our prayers for each other.
- May the Living Word always go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Fill us with knowledge of your will that we may bear fruit, grow and be strengthened with power.

Day 3: We have been liberated (set free) to worship Jesus who is always with us

Isaiah 43:1-5 and Matthew 28:16-20

Derik Myburgh

1. A sinful people.

The second part of the book of Isaiah, also called Deutero-Isaiah, was written during the time of the Babylonian Exile. In all probability the prophet acted during the time between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.

Isaiah 1-39 warns the people of Judah against the effects of their sins. Isaiah 40-55 deals with the people in exile in Babylon. The people did not have an easy time. They had lost everything. Jerusalem was in ruins, the temple had been destroyed and the people found themselves in a foreign land with a highly developed culture where heathen gods were worshipped. God's people struggled with the question, where is God? Does He still exist, or is He buried in the ruins of the temple?

Isaiah speaks a prophetic word to the devastated people in exile. It is mainly a prophecy about the fall of Babylon, liberation, return and restoration of Israel (Jones). The prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah refers to the Exodus narrative a number of times, reminding the people that this event was the most important event in the history of Israel.

The remarkable thing is that God will use the heathen Persian king Cyrus to be instrumental in the restoration of Israel (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1). God certainly turns history upside-down. As a result of their sins, God's elected people find themselves in the biggest crisis since the Exodus events, and God calls a heathen king to make their return to Jerusalem possible!

2. A compassionate God.

Isaiah 43 is in direct contrast to the preceding passage in Isaiah 42:18-25. There we find the reasons for the Exile and the unwillingness of the people to return to God. The people were being punished for their multiple sins. Isaiah 43 then brings a word of comfort. We see the father heart of God. The faithful God of the Covenant declares His love for his people anew, after the terrible time of punishment and suffering in Babylon (Philander).

God makes himself known as the One who both created and formed his people, and also redeemed them. The two mighty acts of God are mentioned in the same verse. God the Creator formed a people out of a slave people at Sinai, after leading them out of Egypt. God has a two-fold claim on his people. He created them and saved them. He called them by name. They are His. For this reason, they have nothing to fear. God is with them. Water holds no danger to them. Remember the Red Sea. The rivers of Babylon cannot stop God's people returning to their land. They need not fear fire, for the Holy One of Israel is their God. Israel is valuable before God. He loves his people. He is with them. Egypt, Cush and Seba as representatives of the heathen nations had been given as ransom for Israel. For the umpteenth time God rescues his people from the hands of their enemies. In verse 5 we read for a second time, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you". God will gather the people of Israel from the North, South, East and West and return them to their land.

The elements of fear, consolation and hope help us to understand this passage. The terrifying results of sin dropped the people into the pit of fear and desolation. Did God forget us completely? Did He write us off? Was the Promised Land only a short-lived pipedream?

No, no, no! God loves his people in spite of their sinfulness and infidelity. He is the faithful God of the Covenant. He has a double claim on his people. He is their Creator and their Redeemer. He is with them. They cannot, should not, be afraid. This is the word of consolation proclaimed by Deutero-Isaiah.

3. Hope from God's Book of consolation.

This Divine consolation gives rise to hope. Liberation is coming. The road back to Jerusalem is already under construction. A new future awaits God's people.

The affirmation that God is with his people is a common thread through the Old Testament. Here we think of God's word of encouragement to Joshua, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). Psalm 23:4 reminds us that God is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. According to Psalm 121:5 God is as close as my own shadow.

Did you ever, as a child, try to run away from your own shadow? Impossible! God is with us. Always. Everywhere. He reaches out to us to stand and live in a relationship with Him.

4. Jesus is God with us.

In Matthew 28 Jesus greets His disciples for the last time before his ascension. Some worshipped him, but some doubted. What will happen now? Jesus is going away. What will become of his disciples? What will become of his Kingdom? Jesus reminds them again of the *God with us* idea. His name is not Immanuel for nothing. "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (verse 20).

Jesus guides his disciples from a situation of fear and doubt and gives us the consolation of his everlasting presence. He combines this promise of eternal presence with the commandment to lead others to discipleship. This is an act aiming at the future.

We live in the hope and expectation of Jesus' return. We, his disciples, become co-workers in building his kingdom. We become witnesses. We become disciple makers. This keeps us busy. We become part of the new future promised by Jesus. And He is with us to the end of time!

Our relationship with Jesus sets us free to pray continuously, for God in Christ is with us every moment of the day.

5. Prayer themes:

- We rejoice and praise God for His presence in Jesus Christ.
- We celebrate anew our position as redeemed sinners before God.
- We confess that we don't also recognise God's presence with other Christians.
- We ask that God will make His presence visible to those who are in danger, lonely or rejected.
- We pray that we shall be faithful followers of Jesus, throughout the year, irrespective of what may happen.

Day 4: Set free to live from God's promises

Psalm 50:1-6, 14-15

Henco van der Westhuizen

1. Why would I go to church?

Since January 1967, monthly articles are published in *De Kerkvoogdij*, a once-a-month publication of the "Vereniging van Kerkvoogdijen" in die Dutch Reformed Church. In 1971, these articles by Arnold van Ruler, professor at the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, was published under the title *Waarom zou ik naar de kerk gaan?* (1971).

In this remembrance year the question is relevant again. Why would I go to church *in these days*?

2. Why would *they* go to church?

Maybe one way to answer this question today, is to consider the meaning of this "Psalm of Asaph" (verse 1). What exactly is meant by the Psalm *of Asaph*, we do not really know. What we do indeed know, is that the Psalm was used in the cult, or in today's terms, the church. In light of this, the Psalm perhaps shows us why it was so dear to *them* to get together in the cult, in worship. Why *they* would go to church.

By using the Psalm in the cult, the churchgoers were *reminded*.

They were reminded of the fact that they were set free to call upon the Lord. "... and call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you ..." Of *this* they are reminded! In the day of trouble, they are not left to their own mercy, not even to the mercy of the rulers over and of the cult or church. They are free to call upon the Lord themselves. The will deliver them!

This was also emphasised by the Reformers. "We are not made of iron, so as not to be shaken by temptations. But this is our consolation, this is our solace – to deposit, or to disburden in God everything that harasses us. Confidence, it is true, brings tranquillity to our minds, but it is only in the event of our exercising ourselves in prayers. Whenever, therefore, we are assailed by any temptation, let us betake ourselves forthwith to prayer, as to a sacred asylum" (John Calvin).

But this was not all they were reminded of! They were also reminded that they were set free by the *Lord*: "The Mighty One, God, the Lord" (verse 1) "I am God, your God." (verse 7). "... a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages" (verse 3). The images of a fire and a storm are used. Because God, about whom we can only speak in images, is like a burning fire, like a raging storm. He is Lord indeed! But not only this. The Lord is like a judge. "And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice" (verse 6). But He is different from the images they had about judges, because the heavens declare "his righteousness" (verse 6).

On 26 September 1986, when the Dutch Reformed Mission Church accepted the *Belhar Confession* in the light of a *status confessionis*, it was indeed the Lord's righteousness that was emphasised. Herein is confessed "that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right".

But that is still not all they were reminded of! They were reminded that this Lord was coming! "Our God comes" (verse 3). "From Zion, in perfect beauty, God shines forth" (verse 2). The Lord is truly not a Lord who is distant from what was happening with them here. He is the Lord that will be coming, that will become part of the realities of which they were part. From Zion, city of perfect beauty, the Lord shines forth. He did not consider his existence in godlike manner as something to which He had to cling, but, through the years, He even made himself into nothing, by taking on the nature of a slave and becoming equal to them.

In this way He broke through the silence: "Our God ... will not be silent" (verse 3). They were reminded of this too! Because God is not apathetic and silent about what happens in their realities. He is all but silent! He "speaks" (verse 1). They were therefore reminded of the Lord who really talks, who speaks, who, as it were, has a voice that truly says what should be said!

But still this is not all they were reminded of. Because the Lord not only breaks through the silence. The Lord does not only speak. The Lord *summons!* "He summons the heavens above, and the earth" (verse 4). He "summons the earth from the rising sun to where it sets" (verse 1). He summons *them*. "Gather to me this consecrated people, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (verse 5). Or perhaps will make a covenant with me. He also summoned them. He summoned them to pay: "Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfil your vows to the Most High" (verse 14). The Lord therefore gave them a *vocatio*, a mission.

They were reminded of the following too, because the Lord does not want to be paid with all sorts of worthless things (verse 8-13 and 16-22). For the Reformers this was of the utmost importance! They had an absolute aversion for superstition, a resentment towards all kinds of *idolatry*.

No, they were now reminded that they needed to pay with their whole lives. Those who honour Him, who live righteously, must bring praise as a sacrifice. "Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me, and to the blameless I will show my salvation" (verse 23). Life in the face of God is in fact different from life *in* the world. Life *coram Deo*, is a life *coram Deo loquendi*, in the face of the speaking God.

3. Why would we go to church?

Maybe this is what the Lord also wants to remind us of in this year of remembrance. That we are set free by the Lord. That we may therefore call upon the Lord. That the Lord also comes to *us*. That the Lord also bursts through the silence for *us*. That the Lord speaks. That the Lord calls *us* to a life in die face of God. *In* the world!

Yes, it may still today be the answers to the question why we would go to church.

4. Prayer themes:

- Pray that the Lord will help us to be reminded that we are set free to call upon Him.
- Pray that the Lord will help us to be reminded that He comes, that He will burst through the silence, and speak.
- Also pray that the Lord will help to be reminded once again that He calls us to a life *coram Deo*.

Day 5: As free people we serve one another with the gospel

2 Kings 5:1-14

Myrtle Joubert

1. Good and bad times.

All people, or then surely most people, experience good times *and* hard times. It is as if people, especially at the beginning of a new year, when everyone has resolutions for the new year, and is intensely aware of the need to live well, then reflect on how to serve other people. During this time of year, we are also more aware of shared crises: moral, economic, political, educational, social, ecological and spiritual.

There is probably not a single person on earth who has never been treated badly, or hasn't hurt someone else along the way. When people and/or situations disappoint us, we sometimes lose hope and we are filled with remorse. We develop emotions of anger, resentment or grievance. Often to such an extent that our negative feelings devour us. The situations in which we find ourselves, may often even have a much deeper physical and spiritual impact than we realise ourselves.

2. Healing of Naaman.

In our Scripture passage, two contrasts are drawn, namely: a renowned hero with an incurable disease, in contrast with a humble slave girl from Israel who eventually offers the only hope on healing. We take a closer look at the contrasts to determine what it manifests of God:

A mighty military commanding officer, but powerless to heal himself;

A slave who are not allowed to speak, but who presents her oppressors with a solution;

A king who is desperate while an insignificant slave offers the solution;

A general who should be esteemed with the best treatment, but is treated in an ordinary manner;

The advice of kings that is of no use, but the advice of labourers that brings him to healing for a second time;

A kind-hearted child who had been kidnapped or stolen from her parents;

A poor slave acts kindly and without malice or resentment towards her master.

If this young girl had been grumpy, miserable, unpleasant, gloomy and vindictive, Naaman would never have been healed of his illness. If the young Jewish girl had not been an honest slave, would Naaman have reacted on her words? Naaman does indeed react upon her words, but could have queried it because he could have asked why he should take notice of a slave and on top of that a child. He could also have thought that the girl wanted to take revenge because she had been kidnapped.

3. She added value.

Had Naaman suspected that she had been telling lies, he would not have spent the money or go through all the trouble to meet the man of God. He did indeed value her words, not only out of desperation, but possibly also because of the integrity of the child. This girl added value with her advice, while all the medical practitioners in Syria couldn't do anything for the military leader. She was of more value to Naaman than all his silver and gold or his social standing.

4. God works through any person in his own way.

The story of Naaman's healing and the role that a young Jewish slave girl played in a foreign land, make us aware of God's free acts and his inclusion of people in his work of redemption. This Old Testament story has a lesson for Christian believers who have been called, by the blood of Christ, to serve God and their neighbours with the gifts they received from God.

Any person, whether a young Christian or the most marginalised person, can be used by God to communicate the truth of his saving grace to sinners. The message of redemption in Jesus Christ is the gift of God that everyone who believes in Jesus shall not be lost.

5. In view of the new year.

May we, as followers of Jesus, in the following year, influence people to answer evil with good, love, and goodwill. This story reveals that God is not only interested in people's spiritual needs. He is rather interested in our every daily need. God is involved with the community of believers as well as the affairs of the world. He becomes involved with individuals, outcasts, and outsiders. God takes heed of the leaders of nations, but also of insignificant people who approach Him for help.

Therefore, the community of believers can (must!) serve God's creation as people who were set free in Christ. Pay attention to the spiritual needs of others in this year, but also support them in their daily material needs. Make the love of Christ visible, because we were set free by Christ our Lord, to serve.

8. Prayer themes:

- Pray for crisis situations: moral, economic, political, educational, social, ecological and spiritual.
- Pray that Christian communities of believers will influence people to answer evil with good, love, and kindness.
- Pray for all people's ordinary daily needs.

7. Prayer (By Prof Nico Koopman).

Dear Lord, please provide for us in our various crises: moral, economic, political, educational, social, ecological and spiritual.

We are in the midst of a political crises, dear Lord. Our country is a democracy. We look good on paper. We have one of the best constitutions in the world. We have more or less great policies and laws and processes in place that aim at implementing the vision and right of the constitution.

Lord, but after twenty years of democracy things are not going well. Lord, we don't look good on the playing field. Lord, we have human rights, but our society also needs right humans. We confess our theft and lies, our corruption and deceit, our greed and gluttony, our hunger for power and abuse of power and authority, our selfishness and neglect of those in our midst who struggle to survive, our gambling with the future of our children.

Lord give us leaders that seek the wellbeing and shalom of all.

Amen

Day 6: As free people we serve God to whom all things belong

Psalm 24 and Colossians 1:15-20

Nthozakhe Cezula

1. God the Creator.

First and foremost, it is important to identify the genre of this text. This is a poem. Poetry was a natural medium through which to express the most profound of the human feelings and insights. Prayer, praise, liturgy, wisdom, and lament were conveyed in words of poetry. In Psalm 24 we have a liturgical poem. The first verse includes two sentences in a parallel relationship. The first sentence declares God's sovereignty over the whole earth. The second sentence affirms God's sovereignty by specifying that all the inhabitants of the earth belong to the Creator.

The second verse takes the conversation to another level. It gives a reason why the earth belongs to God. It is because God has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. There is more to this statement than mere water. The seas and the rivers symbolise something bigger than only water. The seas and the rivers symbolise the chaos that God replaced with order.

The author evokes the language of creation. Genesis 1:1-2 proclaims that God created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning the earth was without form and void. Darkness was over the face of the deep. There was chaos before God brought about order on earth. In the words of Richard Clifford, the defeat of chaos removed the great obstacle to an orderly universe. James Luther Mays observes that chaos is always there, hostile to the ordered world. However, the world exists because the Lord is and remains sovereign.

According to Walter Brueggemann no other idol or power has conquered these powers of chaos but God. That is the emphasis of this opening of praise. It is God – and not chaos or Baal – who is sovereign over the creation. He tamed chaos and brought order to the world. To that I agree; we are free from chaos because God made freedom possible. The word "freedom" is a popular word in our communities nowadays. When people refer to freedom, most of the time they refer to acting, speaking or thinking as they see fit. However, from a religious point of view, the word is informed by foundational religious principles. In this case, it is by the religious principle of creation.

2. God's Holy Place.

Progressing, this section attaches creation to the Creator's holy place. The author asks who can climb the Lord's mountain and who can stand in His holy place. The answer is only those with clean hands and pure hearts. The hands represent the deeds and the heart the thoughts. Such people do not lift up their souls to falsehood and do not swear deceitfully. Because of that, they receive blessings from the Lord and justice from the God of their salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, those who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Making sense of this scenario, Brueggemann depicts the Jerusalem temple as symbolic of creation and the order that the Lord brought to it. Thus, those who worship in the Lord's holy place have a responsibility of clean deeds and pure thoughts. It is important here to notice that the emphasis on worshipping is not ritual but ethical. The connection between worship and ethics becomes significant. The freedom that has been bestowed on humanity by the creation event, has creation as its foundation and therefore there is an expectation of ethical behaviour from worshipers.

3. The King of Glory.

God the Creator is designated the king of glory. Brueggemann describes Him as "the powerful and victorious king who is able to deliver". He comes to enter His holy place. The gates and the doors are supplicated so that the King of Glory may enter. He is described as God who is strong and mighty. He is God who is strong in war.

J Clinton MacCann observes that the portrayal of God as a warrior links verses 1-2 and 7-10. In the Ancient Near East, creation was often seen as a battle. God won against chaos and thereby demonstrated sovereignty. According to him, the word "hosts" can refer both to an army and the assembly of the heavenly beings. The term "Lord of Hosts" can thus depict His sovereignty both in heaven and on earth. McCann describes verses 7-

10 as the dramatic version of the confession of verses 1-2. I intuit therefore that by placing the worshipping community in the middle, the author shows us how protective God is for them.

4. As Free People We Serve God to Whom All Things Belong.

Having heard what Psalm 24 tells us, as Christians in this time in history, the reading of this psalm should remind us of the source of our freedom as free people, and its implications for our lives. As Ernst Conradie rightly observes, freedom, and many similar words, has been “taken over within a secular context and reimported in ecclesial language but with its secularised connotations”.

In agreement with him, we therefore need to recover the evangelical roots of the notion of freedom, as we are in a new covenant, in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Taking cue from Peter T O’Brien as he explains the Book of Colossians, our deeds and thoughts should be focused in Jesus because we have been united in Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. He was the same person praised as the exalted Lord of creation and reconciliation in the magnificent hymn of 1:15–20.

Finally, Jesus is the Lord of creation and freedom. Therefore, as free people we should serve Jesus to whom all things belong.

5. Prayer Themes:

- Thank God for saving the earth from chaos.
- Pray that God help our youngsters to discern His saving acts.
- Pray that God save our national leaders and give them wisdom and cause them to promote righteousness and life.