

**Abbey International Baptist Church
Worship 10.30 am 24th November 2024
Service conducted by Rev Dr Zoltan Biro**

www.abbeybaptistchurch.org.uk

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Welcome

Theme – Our Unity in Christ

Invocation

*Praise the Lord, all you nations.
Praise him, all you people of the earth.
For his unfailing love for us is powerful;
the Lord's faithfulness endures forever.*

—Psalm 117

Opening Prayer

*As we gather to celebrate and give thanks
for your abundant blessings,
may we live within your reality,
share your vision,
and do your will,
that the whole earth may echo your glory. **Amen.***

MP: 307

**I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart,
I will enter His courts with praise;
I will say this is the day that the Lord has made,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.**

**He has made me glad,
He has made me glad,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.**

**He has made me glad,
He has made me glad,
I will rejoice for He has made me glad.**

LEONA VON BRETHORST © 1976 MARANATHA! MUSIC / ADM. BY COPYCARE.

Call to Worship

God stretches out the heavens and shapes the earth.

Come and give thanks!

God raises up the mountains and pours water into the seas.

Come and give thanks!

God calls forth plants from the soil and forms animals in infinite variety.

Come and give thanks!

God breathes upon us and fills us with life.

Come lift your voices in praise!

God gives our lives meaning through laughter and tears.

Come lift your voices in praise!

God touches our hearts through family and friends.

Come lift your voices in praise!

God loves us and blesses us with everything good.

Come and worship!

God loves us and overwhelms us with never-ending generosity.

Come and worship!

God loves us and surrounds us with love in abundance!

Come and worship!

BP&W 346

**Just as I am, without a plea,
But that your blood was shed for me,
And that you will me to be free,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
All that I need in you to find,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, you will receive,
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,**

**Because your promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, your love unknown
Has broken every barrier down;
Now to be yours, yes, yours alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, of that free love
The breadth, length, depth and height to prove,
Here for a season, then above,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

CHARLOTTE ELLIOTT (1789-1871)

Family time

(After which the children will go to their groups)

BP&W 358 *(The offering will be taken during this hymn)*

**Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.**

**Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee.**

**Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.**

**Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold;
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as Thou shalt choose.**

**Take my will, and make it Thine;
It shall be no longer mine:
Take my heart, it is Thine own;
It shall be Thy royal throne.**

Take my love; my Lord, I pour

At Thy feet its treasure store:

Take myself, and I will be

Ever, only, all for Thee.

FRANCES RIDLEY HAVERGAL (1836-79)

Prayer of Dedication

Bible Reading 1: Psalm 133 (New Living Translation)

Bible Reading 2: Galatians 3:21-29 (New Living Translation)

Sermon: Being One in Christ

Contrary to popular Christian belief, the law is not the enemy of grace. It is a gift from God, intended to guide God's people toward an abundant life, toward a life where everyone thrives. So, what's going on in the letter to the Galatians?

Here Paul is absolutely outraged and gives a barrage of bitter statements about the law, or rather he targets his opponents who have placed the observance of the law as central to the symbols of faith. At the heart of their preaching is a faith that requires obedience to the law.

These opposing teachers seem to have linked the law with receiving the promises of Abraham. So earlier in the chapter Paul reminds the believers that God has given the inheritance to Abraham by an unconditional promise, not by Abraham's ability to follow the law (3:17-18), after all the law was given 430 years later than the promise.

Yet the law has important functions:

*Firstly, it highlights our mistakes and sins (3:19). It cannot correct them, but it identifies them. The law can point toward goodness, justice, and peace, but it cannot create peaceable, loving, and just people. **The law is not in the business of transformation.***

Secondly, the law is a guide. The law is not opposed to God's promises (3:21). Rather, the law is a guide toward the kind of abundant life that God wants for God's creation, but the law cannot guarantee that life.

Finally, the law can protect us from falling wayside, by creating guilt and shame, but at the same time the law has a tendency to control, to take away our freedom and to subdue us.

UNDER THE LAW we are RESTRICTED

To help us understand these restrictions the apostle uses 2 pictures, well known in ancient times.

Firstly, in verse 23 we read "the law held us as prisoners".

A better translation of "being held", is "being guarded by a garrison". Paul sounds a bit Over the top, but this phrase was generally used as a military term meaning the lockdown of a walled city or fortress, to prevent both the incursion of the enemy, and at the same time also prevented the inhabitants to leave.

In other words, the law protects us from the evil one, by taking away our freedom and imprisoning us. This doesn't sound like the abundant life God planned for us.

Secondly, in verse 24 we read "the law was the guardian in charge of us". Now the word translated as "guardian" refers to a pedagogue or teacher (paidagogos). In the Greco-Roman culture the pedagogue was a servant who's duty was the complete development of the heir, both intellectually and behaviourally. At best he was a tutor who cared for the child and at worst it became a bully, who punished him. This was a critical role, nowadays it would fall somewhere between a nanny and a carer. This person had to protect the heir at all costs, he had to see to the heir's education and training and stay with the heir always.

*Once apostle Paul established, that the function of the law is to direct people toward abundant life **where everyone thrives**, he reminds us that the law cannot guarantee that life. Thus the assurance of such life is not the law, but what God has done in Christ. "Now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law to be our guardian" (v.25).*

IN CHRIST we are THE CHILDREN OF GOD

In verses 26 and 27 the apostle explains what this means:

"For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes."

Paul evokes a picture which must have been very familiar for the Galatian Christians. He uses a language from early baptismal liturgy, when the newly baptized believers were clothed in a white garment, that was a symbol of the righteousness of Christ.

All who have been baptized into Christ are clothed with him, wrapped in him, and incorporated into him so that they become one with Christ... So in this way Christ becomes their primary identity marker.

Becoming the children of God is only possible if we are in Christ. God as the universal Father of all creation was not a doctrine preached either by Jesus or by his disciples. God in the Bible is indeed the all-powerful creator and king of everything, but he only fathered our Lord Jesus Christ, followers of Christ can also call God their father because they were adopted in God's family because of Christ. In other words, if you want to call God your father you have to be in Christ.

Your old self, your old behaviour, your old lifestyle, your old traditions, are taken off like your old garment at the baptism and a new way of life is put on like a new white garment. Paul already talked about this in the previous chapter: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (3:20).

THROUGH CHRIST we are ONE

However, being in Christ not only transforms our relationship with God, who we can now call Father, but it also changes our human relationships too.

"Now, in Christ, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or free, male or female. You are all the same in Christ Jesus (v28)".

The Babylonian Talmud, a Jewish prayer book, includes a morning blessing to be recited by every Jewish man, thanking God for not creating him a gentile, a slave, or a woman (Menahoth 43b). While we don't know for sure that this prayer pre-dates Paul, it certainly demonstrates the power these three categories held in the ancient world. Paul's declaration that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, is a radical dismantling of these primary identity and boundary markers based on the economy of God's grace.

Firstly, from God's perspective we are all the same, we are all broken people who need healing, we are all sinners who need forgiveness, we are all selfish beings who need God's transforming love. Jews, Greeks, Hungarians, English, Hongkongers, Iranians, men, women, aristocrats, doctors, businessman or binman. It doesn't matter how we identify ourselves. We all need God's grace, and in that respect we are all the same.

Secondly, not only that we are equal in our fallenness, likewise through Christ we are all restored. More than that, as we become part, as we are folded into Jesus Christ, we also become one with each other. Differences in ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status do not magically disappear, of course, but Paul declares them to be irrelevant in the body of Christ.

"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise". All who belong to Christ share fully and equally in the inheritance of God's promises and the call to live as God's children and heirs. But what is amazing in this final statement is that Paul switches to plural. Only together, only when we are one, when we are united, we get the inheritance of the abundant life God always planned for us.

The categories that divide us today may be different than in Paul's day, divisions persist in congregations and in the broader church — divisions that run along lines of ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, ideology, political affiliation, and any number of other factors.

Paul reminds us that whatever human categories may describe us, they do not define us, "for all of us are one in Christ Jesus." All human categories are subordinate and ultimately irrelevant to our primary identity as members of the body of Christ.

Paul's message to the Galatians warns us too against allowing divisions to destroy the freedom, unity, and mission to which God has called us in Christ. This, of course does not mean that "anything goes" in terms of how we live. Paul has plenty to say about how we are to live out our freedom in Christ, in Galatians 5 and 6, but that is for another time.

So, let us not forget that God called us to bless "all the families of the earth,".

*Let's not forget, that this promise which was first given to Abraham and subsequently to us as heirs, takes priority over all human agendas. Everything else is secondary. **Amen.***

BP&W 326

Abba Father let me be

**Yours and Yours alone.
May my will forever be
Ever more Your own.
Never let my heart grow cold,
Never let me go.
Abba Father, let me be
Yours and Yours alone.**

DAVE BILBROUGH © 1977 KINGSWAY'S THANKYOU MUSIC.

Prayer of Intercession (closing with the Lord's Prayer)

God our Father, we come to you now with our concerns for the world you have made and continue to care for.

We live in a complex and unpredictable world; we do not claim to understand all the situations which arise but we do want to show solidarity with those who suffer. We bring before you the conflict between Ukraine and Russia; we see with horror pictures of the violence in the Middle East, including the destruction in Gaza and other places.

We pray for governments worldwide. We ask you to guide their counsels and actions both internationally, nationally and locally. We pray particularly for our local Members of Parliament in this area and that they will truly have the interests of those they represent at heart.

We ask for protection for people affected by adverse climate events including the recent serious flooding around the world. We pray for the people who have been affected and lost their homes and livelihoods. We also pray for those who have no homes and protection from the weather; we are grateful that provision is now being made in hotels for those at risk during this exceptionally cold weather.

Many of us have friends and families in various parts of the world and we pray for safety for them whatever their situation may be; we thank you that modern media allow contact to be maintained.

Today we thank you for regular ministry here at Abbey Baptist Church and for Zoltan's visit today. We pray for our ongoing witness here in Reading as we look forward into a new year and future ministry.

*We bring all our prayers in Jesus' name. **Amen***

THE LORD'S PRAYER: YOU ARE INVITED TO PRAY IN YOUR OWN LANGUAGE

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,
Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins,
As we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are Yours
Now and for ever and ever. Amen.**

BP&W 566

**To God be the glory! Great things He has done!
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.**

***Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son;
And give Him the glory, great things He has done!***

**O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.**

**Great things He hath taught us, great things He hath done,
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son:
But purer and higher and greater will be
Our wonder, our worship, when Jesus we see!**

FRANCES VAN ALSTYNE (1820-1915)

Final Blessing

*May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May He make His face shine upon you
and be gracious to you.*

*May the broad expanse of God's love
and the abundance of His riches in glory,
shape your perspective on your own life and needs,
including those things which disappoint you.*

*May the eyes of your heart be open
to all the blessings which surround you.*

*May thankfulness rise within you day after day,
from the early morning until you retire for the night.*

*May thoughts of Jesus fill your mind,
and the hunger for God drive your soul,
and the love for the Lord guide your speech and your actions.*

And finally,

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
The love of God and the fellowship of the holy spirit be with us all now and for
evermore. Amen**