

Sunday 3rd June 2018
'deliver us from evil'

I would imagine that there are very few people who do not recognize that there is great evil abroad in the earth. Whether it is the evil of slavery, racism, unjust wages, bereavement, or some other thing, very few, if any of us will go through life without being impacted by evil. For the Christian there is a greater awareness of evil. We are aware that we have hearts which one moment would do anything for God, and the next would deny Him. If you doubt this, ask the apostle Peter.

The bad news is that there is evil in the world, evil in us, and a devil to contend with. The good news is that none other than Jesus tells us to ask our Father to deliver us from evil. Not only is this an important and legitimate request to make, but the clear implication of it is that not only can God deliver us from evil, but that He is willing and able to deliver us from evil.

The subject of evil has fascinated and baffled every generation, so this piece will not solve the dilemma's and questions. However we will try to address some matters of a practical nature. At the end of the day, we seek deliverance, not a theory to explain it all or understand it all. We don't have to understand aeronautics to be rescued by a sea rescue helicopter, what matters is that the helicopter comes when we are lost at sea!

If Jesus tells us to ask for deliverance, He does so because we need to be delivered. That is simple enough, yet the Jews in Jesus day denied their need of deliverance, and so do most people in our age. Jesus does not say to pray to the Father as one possible option, He presents it as the only option. This at once sets things like international treaties and statements, business, military and social alternatives in their place. Only God can deliver from evil, everything else we humans come up with only shifts the chairs on the deck of the Titanic.

You may regard what I have just said as naive or dismissive to the life work of others. I do not mean it to be taken this way. However, I would ask you to consider this, did the War to end Wars actually do this? Has massive investment in nations actually brought their troubles to a halt, or has it only raised other problems as one is addressed? I maintain my position that only God can deliver actually and effectively.

What does the Bible mean when it talks about evil? Some Philosophers have spoken of evil as being the absence of good. This is not how the Bible describes evil. A few passages to allude to gives us a clue. When Cain is angry with Able, God speaks to warn Cain that unless he is careful, the evil which is couching beside him will strike. The picture is of a big cat wound up ready to spring on its prey. Evil is not a passive thing, it stalks and pounces on the unwary. Galatians talks about an inner conflict, the flesh lusting against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. The picture here is that of a wrestling match where it almost seems that equals are in conflict, and either could deliver the knockout blow at any moment. Then in Romans 7, a much disputed

passage, we read that the evil that lies close prevents us from doing freely what our hearts would desire to do. Evil is active, powerful, and aggressive

Evil in the Bible is presented as an active force, almost a personified force, a power that seeks constantly to exert its influence. This is partly so because wherever evil works, the devil has his fingers in it somewhere, and he is a person. Certainly, when someone is born again and becomes a Christian, they find a change of experience which many describe as having been turned around 180 degrees, to swim against the tide, and not with it! Does this resonate with your experience? Well done, this is the way of the faith!

1. In Exodus 1, we have the beginning of the Exodus story. The suffering of the people of God becomes so hard that they cry out in their pain. This is not exactly the prayer, 'deliver us from evil.' Their cry was more that which was caused by their pain, but God heard it and acted. God responded in mercy, and began a work which not only led to the people leaving Egypt, but proved to be the birth of their nation.

The prayer that Jesus taught is much more direct. It builds on the history of the Old Testament which shows that God is willing and is mighty to deliver. The Bible affirms this, the old Hymns proclaim it, and history since testifies, that when a person or a people or a nation turns to God for deliverance, God will hear and act. In the Bible there are many passages which affirm this, and some of them are conditional, while others portray God acting in sovereign mercy and grace.

2. Why do we need to ask God to deliver us?

Very simply, we need to do so because we are not equal to the forces arrayed against us. The Luther hymn we sang today expresses this well when it says,

With force of arms we nothing can,
Soon were we down ridden.
But for us fights the Proper Man
Whom God Himself hath bidden.
Ask ye who is this same
Christ Jesus is His Name,
The Lord Sabaoth's Son,
He, and no other one,
Will conquer in the battle.

Don't be fooled. There is a battle raging with evil in the spiritual realm, in the world and in our lives and hearts. There are no smart bombs against evil, no strategies we can formulate, no army which can withstand it without God's deliverance. Think of the empires which have come and gone. Not all of them fell to superior powers. Many fell into evil and were ripped apart from within. That is the power of evil at work. Some would say that no army overwhelmed the Roman Empire before it had already self-destructed because of evil.

The evil that the Bible refers to is less about specific acts of evil, but is about the principles of evil. We learn of spiritual powers of wickedness in the heavenly places. Powers and principalities which rule and influence our world, powers which we are to contend against. This conflict is not against flesh and blood, this means that the ultimate source of evil is not people, but spiritual forces. Moreover, the Bible speaks of the devil as the prince of the power of the air, the god of this world, the strong man who keeps his goods secure, the accuser and the deceiver. He has other titles, but that is enough to be going on with. As the title of an old book says, 'Satan is alive and well on planet earth.' He is the source of all evil in its ultimate sense.

It is this that makes evil so powerful. Satan and his fallen angels have been peddling their poison for a long time. They know mankind well and are aware of every means of deception and seduction. They are powerful, experienced and malicious, so without God's help we are out gunned, out maneuvered, and lack the strength and even the will to resist them! But Jesus said, ask to be delivered, so we can and must do so!

3. Evil acts to seduce, deceive and destroy. Evil only ever gives rise to more evil, unless God steps in. Think of the seven Churches in Revelation. Not one of them remains today! No congregation or denomination should think that because they are called a Church that God is obliged to preserve it if it goes astray. The Church of Scotland, and every congregation of it will not survive unless it takes heed to God. If you doubt this, read some Church history, research how a vibrant denomination like the Methodists have declined, and take heed. We must all take heed.

New expressions of Church fare no different. In fact, they are at a greater risk of aging quickly because they do not always have the roots that others have. What protects the Church is the Word and Spirit. These are what cause us to grow up spiritually as individuals and as congregations. We need to read the Scriptures personally and pray, meditate over it, and attend the public preaching of the word. One without the other is not sufficient.

4. The Hebrews cried out under their sore oppression, and God heard their cry and had mercy on them. The prayer that Jesus is inviting and instructing us to pray is much meatier than what the Hebrews did. We are to pray for deliverance, a much more direct petition than a cry of misery. We are to pray with the understanding and expectation of deliverance.

However, let's look at the Hebrew experience to see what is meant by deliverance. The Exodus is a thrilling and important story, as it on a physical plain describes what deliverance is on a spiritual plane. The earthly is a shadow of the heavenly deliverance in Christ. To reduce it down to an important lesson, the Exodus shows us that God acts to deliver the people, but they also have a part to play. God overwhelms their captives, but they have a long walk to make, and things to face to prove their hearts and transform them from slaves to free people. Sadly the history of the journey is not encouraging due to the people's unbelief and disobedience.

We need to understand that when Jesus tells us to pray for daily deliverance from evil, that does not mean that we are excused from any application of obedience and fighting. God says that He will do thus and so, and that He requires that we believe, listen and obey. Many believers think that deliverance means that we are passive, not so. When the D Day landings happened to deliver Europe from Hitler, the fiercest fighting of the War occurred between D Day and VE Day. So it is in Christianity. When we ask for deliverance from evil, we also need to realise that we are signing up to be soldiers of the Great Commander who is delivering. How anyone can read Ephesians chapter 6 without seeing this is beyond me! Ephesians 6 describes the Christian life as hand to hand combat, wrestling, not resting, agonising, not organizing.

Paul tells Timothy to engage in this good warfare of Faith. It is a good warfare because it does not destroy cities and nations and kill people, it is good because it is for the salvation of our souls and the souls of others.

In the Christian life there are no civilians, we are either soldiers or we are captives. Therefore we must join in the deliverance of God by playing our part, turning from sin, seeking the Kingdom, growing in holiness by means of the application of the Christian disciplines and Church life. This is the reason I raise the subject of prayer and reading the Scriptures and meditating on them so often. These are some of the means God has given us to grow, to co-operate in His great works of deliverance, and without them we may wait in vain for deliverance to come.

It is my belief that the Church of Scotland, and much of the Church in Scotland is operating on momentum from previous generations, and that momentum is rapidly slowing. Once again if we were to read Church history, we would learn about the sorts of people who went before us. When John Knox exclaimed, 'Give me Scotland or I die!' he was not producing a sound bite for a tweet nor was he formulating a hash tag, he actually meant it! There are men and women who prayed in earnest, who waited on God, who prayed for deliverance, and they got a revival. Read the account of the Lewis Revival as told by Duncan Campbell, and you will learn about the handful of people who got serious with God in prayer, and who literally prayed down revival. We must, every one of us pray daily for deliverance from evil.

5. We are surrounded with wicked spiritual powers, but if we are believers, we are temples of the Holy Spirit who is of a different nature and order than any power or principality or the devil himself. It is Christ in us and with us, the Lion of Judah, the Lord who was crucified, buried, raised on the third day, who has ascended to the right hand of God the Father, who acts on our behalf.

We are called to be soldiers, to play our part in the prosecution of the victory of Christ, but soldiers we must be. The Bible tells us that soldiers don't get distracted and involved with civilian affairs. They don't work 9 to 5. They don't retire or take breaks, they are always on duty even when in barracks. As such we should expect hardships and deprivations while the conflict lasts. The Hebrews complained and wanted to go back to

Egypt for the leeks and onions and garlic they got there. We will also face that temptation, but consider what is at stake and count the cost.

Ease and peace comes when we reach the eternal city. Our lot in this life is conflict. The recompense in this life is the joy of engaging in the conflict of the Lord and fighting under His banner and His smile. The joy we have in this life is the smile of God, full peace, the peace of the completed battle comes after. We have joy in this life, but only if we are walking in rank with Christ. Therefore we must count the cost, and follow the Lord.

This is something of the implications that arise when we pray that God would deliver us. It does not take us straight to heaven, nor does it bring ease and peace at once. It brings us into the battle for the full salvation of our souls, a battle that God plays the greatest part in, but a battle in which we are also called to fight.

An old hymn says it well,

'Rise up O men of God.'