

Call to Worship and Thanksgiving:

Holy Father, here we are, placed by you in the body of Christ, your beloved Son. We are one in fellowship with saints and martyrs through the generations and across nations and languages of people. One with those who violent persecutors have harassed. One with those who have held a clear and strong testimony. Father, forgive us for giving so little heed to our sacred heritage. Yet you have brought us and sustained us in it to this day. Please lead us to live worthily with our wider family of faith and embolden us to give true testimony amongst the opportunities you prepare for us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Hymn: Graham Kendrick

1. As we bring our songs of love today do you hear a sound more glorious?
Like the mighty roar of ocean waves many witnesses surround us
It's a harmony of costly praise from the lips of those who suffer
Of sighs and tears and martyrs' prayers until this age is over.

How long, Lord, till you come?

How long till the earth is filled with your song?

How long until your justice shines like the sun?

How long, Lord, till you come?

How long till the earth is filled with your song?

How long, how long?

2. Lord, help us to live worthy of our sisters and our brothers
Who love you more than their own lives who worship as they suffer
To embrace the scandal of the cross not ashamed to tell your story
To count all earthly gain as loss to know you and your glory

Scriptures:

(The Scriptures today teach us the value in our Lord's eyes of our deliberate identification with fellow believers who are suffering, particularly imprisonment for their faith, placing the honour of the Lord before their own comforts).

- Psalm 12
- Matthew 25.31-36
- Hebrews 10.1-25, 32-39, 13.1-3

Prayer: Intercession and Lord's Prayer:

Father in heaven, I lift before your throne the ones who at this moment are crushed by evildoers. I lift any known to me (name them) who are rudely mocked and bullied because of their trust in you. Even such who are small and young and feel lost in a large indifferent mass of people. Where I have cringed and held back and let go of my honour for you, please forgive me and grant me a fresh and emboldened new start. Where I have laboured under the bruises of rejection, lift me up and grant me to send the roots of my faith deep into your Word of endurance and hope.

In Jesus' Name, Amen...

Remember those in Prison: My dear ones, thank you!

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.

Hymn: John Bunyan

Who would true valour see, let him come hither;
One here will constant be, come wind, come weather
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round with dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound; his strength the more is.
No lion can him fright, he'll with a giant fight,
But he will have a right to be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin, nor foul fiend, can daunt his spirit;
He knows he at the end shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away, he'll fear not what men say,
He'll labour night and day to be a pilgrim.

Who would true valour see, let him come hither;
One here will constant be, come wind, come weather
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Sermon: “Remember those in prison as if you are bound with them”

Key text, Hebrews 13.3 “Remember those in prison as if you were bound with them, and those who are mistreated as if you were suffering with them”.

Every direction of our Lord expressed in holy Scripture or directly into our consciences by the Holy Spirit always brings deep assurance of who we are in Christ, as we obey that direction.

His direction, especially. Why? Perhaps because it strengthens the primary command of the New Covenant to ‘love one another as Christ loves us’.

This exhortation is to love those who are in prison. Have you watched a movie about life for a prisoner? You wouldn’t want to change places with them, especially if they are being abused. But in regard to our Christian brothers and sisters, this text tells us to do just that. In the sense of remembering them, thinking of them with so much feeling as if we were with them. This is something to develop, to grow into.

This word also assumes something else of great importance: That imprisonment is the normal and expected experience for followers of our Lord Jesus Christ in some

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places and at sometimes. It also assumes that close and caring relationships between imprisoned and free Christians is normal church life.

Jesus, speaking of the normal life of Christians, explained what he would say to faithful believers on Judgment Day; *"I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you visited Me."*ⁱ

Apostle Paul referenced his prison experience in several places: *"Remember my chains"* (of imprisonment)ⁱⁱ. *"I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal."* *"I am an ambassador in chains."* Onesiphorus *"often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains."* *"I am in chains for the gospel."*ⁱⁱⁱ And the first Christians did exactly what our text says, *"you suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."*^{iv}

This Remembering those in prison as if you were bound with them, is an immense encouragement to those in prison.

Christians imprisoned solely because of their faith often report that they are upheld by the prayers of other believers. Prayers of Christians somewhere else in the world who have heard of them, know a little about them and feel for them before the Lord in prayer.

Richard Wurmbrand captured this palpable spiritual truth in his words:

*"Believe me, so it happened often:
In solitary confinement, on a wintry night
Suddenly, an embrace of warmth and happiness.
And a note of low would sound.
And then I sleeplessly know,
Leaning against the ice-cold wall-
Now, now they are remembering me,
They are begging the Lord for me.
My dear ones, thank you
All, who remembered and believed in us
In the cruellest prison hour.
We, surely could not have
Gone through all from end to end,
Not bowing our head, not faltering,
Without your lofty hearts
Illumining our way".*

Not all will express it so eloquently, but the reality is there. It could be, that prayer bandwidth is strongest when we remember a Christian prisoner.

It is also a blessing and a part of our privileged calling for us who do the remembering. We feel the assurance of our salvation more keenly. Our confidence grows. We are in the reality of true discipleship in this true ongoing remembering. This aspect of our faith prepares us for the future; it helps to destroy the uncertainty hanging over our thoughts about the future. It gets us ready! It sharpens our minds. It makes us nicer to be with. We are more real.

Remember those in Prison: My dear ones, thank you!

Remembering those in prison as if we were bound with them is strong discipleship. So, how might we joyously obey our Lord's command and accept his invitation to follow his ways?

First, we should discover someone who fits the category. This is easy. Go to one of the many agencies supporting persecuted Christians; like Barnabas Aid, Open Doors, Voice of the Martyrs and there are many others. Find out and own it for yourself.

I am currently beginning this remembering with a superintendent pastor in Algeria who has been imprisoned for putting his faith-obedience ahead of his freedom.

Today I learned through Barnabas of a woman in Iran who at 37 years old, in late pregnancy, was sentenced this past week to 16 years in prison and then, to another two years exile forbidden near her hometown. Imagine that, feel that, be with her!

If she became your prisoner, you might download a photo of her. Morning or evening, you would name her before the Lord. You could put your research skills into play to find out about her. Her family, husband, and as much background as possible. You may be able to discover which prison she was being held in and the conditions she is subject to. Because this is so close and important to our Lord, you may well learn much more about hearing the Holy Spirit in the process. She may be taken in for interrogation and face possible torture. The Holy Spirit may surprise you with a prompt because you are attuned to her, and your prayer will be part of her protection. It becomes very 'hands on', doesn't it?

Throughout all of this, she will become part of your family circle, her name will be on your lips and in your heart. It will be a gradual, ongoing relationship. And you will be blessed. You can easily find her name, it isn't hard.

With her are two Christian men; someone will find them too. they received between 8 and 10 years. These three were imprisoned. They were accused of being offensive to Islam because they converted. And, get this, they became part of a House Church, and that is a crime and added to their sentence. The usual size of an Iranian House Church is 14 people, similar to the fellowships many of us are part of.

Do this today, commence remembering a sister or brother who is imprisoned as if you are with them in prison, suffering with them. You may well become part of the unseen ministry that sustains and blesses them with joy. And even leads to their release.

Prayer:

Dear Father, I hear from your word that you want me to remember fellow Christians who are undergoing imprisonment for their faith. I will commence looking for such a prisoner straight away. I will use the resources available to seek out one of these courageous dear ones. And I will stay with them as far as I can through their term of incarceration. So, help me with this wonderful privilege and a calling. With your help, I will be with them a true friend in Christ.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Hymn: by Charles Wesley (T: Leominster)

1. Jesus, my truth, my way, My sure, unerring light,
On thee my feeble steps I stay, which thou wilt guide aright.
My wisdom and my guide, my Counsellor thou art;
O never let me leave thy side, or from thy paths depart!
2. Teach me the happy art in all things to depend
On thee; O never, Lord, depart, but love me to the end!
Let me thy witness live, when sin is all destroyed;
And then my spotless soul receive, and take me home to God.

Benediction:

Come, Lord Jesus, please come, dear Bridegroom; Precious One, come soon,
come soon. Lord, consume me! Oh Lord, don't let me stray, Faithful to You all the
way.

Reflection, from the hymn 'Jesus still lead on' by Nicolaus Zinzendorf

Jesus, still lead on, till our rest be won
And, although the way be cheerless
We will follow, calm and fearless
Guide us by your hand to the promised land.

If the way be drear, if the foe be near
Let no faithless fears o'ertake us
Let not faith and hope forsake us
Safely past the foe to our home we go

When we seek relief from a long-felt grief
When temptations come alluring
Make us patient and enduring
Show us that bright shore where we weep no more

Jesus, still lead on, till our rest be won
Heavenly leader, still direct us
Still support, console, protect us
Till we safely stand in the promised land

This service prepared for HopeNet SA by Rev Ian Clarkson

ⁱ Matthew 25

ⁱⁱ Col 4.18

ⁱⁱⁱ 2Tim 2.19, Eph 6.20, 2Tim 1.16, Philemon 1.13

^{iv} Hebrews 10.34