

Always Reforming

Dr. Justo L. González



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Let us pray:

Oh Lord, may your Spirit open our ears and our hearts to your word so that we may find you in the hearing and follow willingly with our lives.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The psalm is a long one but divided into several parts--verses really--with almost a chorus at the end of each section. We will read it in that fashion. The psalm describes some of the many ways people come to a living faith. They may have been part of the people of God, but never really had been personally closely related to God. They may have been outside God's people but learned to call upon God. Perhaps through this experience they have been added to God's people. This is not an exhaustive list of the different ways a living faith is born, but it does cover many of the most common. Let us read responsively Psalm 107, noting that the beginning is said in unison.

Psalm 107

Thanksgiving for Deliverance from Many Troubles

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble

³and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

⁴Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;

⁵hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.

⁶ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;

⁷ he led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.

⁸ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

⁹ For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things.

¹⁰ Some sat in darkness and in gloom,
prisoners in misery and in irons,

¹¹ for they had rebelled against the words of God
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

¹² Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor;
they fell down, with no one to help.

¹³ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

¹⁴ he brought them out of darkness and gloom,
and broke their bonds apart.

¹⁵ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

¹⁶ For he shatters the doors of bronze
and cuts in two the bars of iron.

¹⁷ Some were sick through their sinful ways
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

¹⁹ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

²⁰ he sent out his word and healed them
and delivered them from destruction.

²¹ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

²² And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;

²⁴ they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.

²⁵ For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,

which lifted up the waves of the sea.
²⁶They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
²⁷they reeled and staggered like drunkards
and were at their wits' end.
²⁸Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
²⁹he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
³⁰Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
³¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
³²Let them extol him in the congregation of the people
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

³³He turns rivers into a desert,
springs of water into thirsty ground,
³⁴a fruitful land into a salty waste,
because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.
³⁵He turns a desert into pools of water,
a parched land into springs of water.
³⁶And there he lets the hungry live,
and they establish a town to live in;
³⁷they sow fields and plant vineyards
and get a fruitful yield.
³⁸By his blessing they multiply greatly,
and he does not let their cattle decrease.

³⁹When they are diminished and brought low
through oppression, trouble, and sorrow,
⁴⁰he pours contempt on princes
and makes them wander in trackless wastes,
⁴¹but he raises up the needy out of distress
and makes their families like flocks.
⁴²The upright see it and are glad,
and all wickedness stops its mouth.
⁴³Let those who are wise pay attention to these things
and consider the steadfast love of the LORD.

People come to faith in God in so many different ways. Some are in physical or social distress, not through their own fault, and find God a helper indeed. Some, like Martin Luther, feel the burden of sin and guilt, and find in God unexpected mercy and forgiveness. What Luther discovered in his biblical study was a God who was indeed loving and forgiving, a God who breaks all the bonds and frees us from our sins. Luther had been raised in a medieval system that encouraged people to think that God was constantly tallying up the score, seeing how many sins they had committed, a God who always looked for our mistakes so we could be punished. It was a God to be feared, a God to hide from rather than seek. People related to God the way Adam and Eve in the Garden hid because they were ashamed.

The ultimate sin was not to love God, for it was as though God demands our love. Luther, however, did not feel he could love such a God, and so his burden of sin increased. He even said that he hated God. Yet in the midst of his study of Scripture he found a very different picture of God. He discovered a God who loves us, and seeks us out, not because we are to be destroyed, but because God wants to redeem us, to rescue us from the bondage to sin that has held us in its power. Luther could indeed say, with the psalmist, that God had brought him out of darkness and gloom and broken his bonds asunder. The work of Christ was an act of God's love, not the beginning of a repeatable sacrifice to pay for our sins. Luther's response was to thank the Lord for his steadfast love, a love that held Luther, even when Luther hated God. Like the psalmist, Luther proceeded to tell others about God's wonderful works to all of humanity.

In another portion of the Psalm, we are told of people who led lives that eventually made them sick—sick in body perhaps, but sick also of the kind of life they were living. They were in such misery that they could neither eat nor rest. In such distress they called upon God, who not only saved and healed them, but also gave them new lives, new futures, new possibilities. They came to faith in the midst of this transformation of their lives, and now they join in praise and thanks to God, testifying to the deeds that God has done in their lives.

Other Christians have a different basis for their life of faith. They have experienced the power of God in nature and come to faith because of the awesomeness of the Creator that they have seen with their own eyes. Perhaps they lived through a terrible storm--as did the sailors in the psalm. Perhaps they witnessed a natural disaster but came through it with an awareness of God's power. They rejoiced when God brought them to their desired haven, to a safe place, and have joined the congregation of the faithful because of this experience.

Others have turned to God in thankfulness for the provision God has made for abundant human life—for fruitful fields and harvests, for joyful family life. Faith can come from great contentment as well as great distress, as long as we do not credit ourselves rather than God for such happiness.

Do we find ourselves in the psalm? Is our story a little different, or some combination of several of these? Do we still look for such a transformation? The psalm makes clear that God's love and mercy are available in all human situations. It is also clear that there is no one right path to God. The great nineteenth century Danish Lutheran theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, once wrote that all paths lead to God, as long as one turns around on it.

Reformation in the church is needed at all times. The church is like a human body in many ways, and Paul uses such imagery very helpfully. But like a living organism, if the church does not renew itself constantly, it is by definition dying. There can be nothing static in a living creature. Either it renews its cells, its life, or it begins the process of dying. The church is not primarily an institution. It is a living organism, the body of Christ.

We cannot live only out of the sixteenth century Reformation. We must be reforming our lives, reappropriating our faith, rediscovering the power of the gospel, not only as individuals, but also as the church itself—as a congregation, as a denomination, as the church catholic. If we do not do this, we are in the process of dying, no matter how solid an institution we appear to be.

Later this morning, as we gather at the Lord's Table, we come as the psalmist says, from so many different pathways that have led us here. Some will come to the table in great thankfulness for what God has done in their lives. Others will come seeking that living faith that

can transform life. Here we experience the God who indeed brings us from east and west, from north and south, who satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.

There is a children's hymn that was very popular in the Episcopal hymnbook for generations, and thankfully it is now found in our own. It, too, describes the many different ways and forms that a faithful life takes. We will sing it now.

