4/12/19 in Kolkata

ROMANS 12:1 is a pivot verse in the book of Romans. At first it appears to be the link between the theory of chapters 1 to 11 and the practice of chapters 12 to 16 joined by the word ‘therefore’. But the intention of the writer, the apostle Paul, is more than that. Rather the word ‘mercy’ encapsulates all the work of God in a believer described in 1 to 11. The word ‘worship’ is the outworking of the work of God in the believer who is yielded to Him as a living sacrifice. Having met the requirements of Romans 12:1 and offered my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, I come off that alter with my whole perception changed. Now **I** am no longer the subject of the sentence of my life. God is the subject. I move to be the object and the verb is the activity of God. Before, I was trying to serve God. After, God is being merciful to me. God is being faithful to me. God loves me. My activity moves away from being my primary focus. God’s activity is now all important. Before, with undue importance given to what I was or should be doing, I carried a subliminal anxiety that I was not measuring up. Now all that matters is God’s activity and He is safe and adequate and faithful and unwavering in His regard of me. I am His son. He views me through the lens of Jesus, and He is perfectly satisfied. My inner world is at Peace.

It is mercy from beginning to end that finally lands the struggling believer on the altar of yielding himself totally to God. It is the mercy of God who provided a gospel of salvation by His power -Romans 1:16. We all began in a sinful state of total depravity whether Jew or Gentile. (1:18 to 3:20). It is Mercy that God intervened in our lives and granted us faith in Jesus Christ. After the model of Abraham who believed though he was ‘dead’ to becoming a father, yet by faith righteousness was credited to him. (3:21-4:25.) Having believed we found peace with God and we began a journey of struggle to live out a life of faith. As we so live we find the death inherited from our first parent, Adam, at work still. (Chap 5). We find sin at work in us which drags us back. But God’s grace applies the death of Jesus to counter sin and release righteousness (Ch 6). We try to live under law to some degree and it wells up more sin within. We fail and struggle and feel like slaves to sin. At times we despair as we discover that no good lives within us and we turn back to Christ to be rescued again and again. (Ch 7) In all this struggle and apparent defeat our status as sons is never under threat because we are in Christ Jesus. He gives us His Spirit who becomes in us the life we need even as we encounter death and defeat of our sinful body dwelling also within us. It is struggle to let go of our sinful human nature and trust instead in Christ. Hardship is the context God uses to reveal His love which overcomes all (Ch 8). Then in chapters 9 to 11 Paul wrestles from our grasp any notion that we had anything within ourselves to commend us to God. Our faith is entirely His mercy whether Jew or Gentile, whether His choice, His call, His message and His drawing us to Himself until finally we called on Him in our desperate need and were saved. From beginning to end we are a product of God’s mercy. All glory is rightly His alone.

And so we arrive at Rom 12:1. We have nothing to say of ourselves, no righteousness, no striving to live victoriously, no zeal, not even our faith. All is a gift of God. As we look back down our life, we see in ourselves sin, struggle, failure, anguish, defeat and occasional victory. But undergirding our lives has been God’s call, God’ grace, God’s mercy and God’s love. It has been longer and higher and deeper than all our losses and pain. Our sonship gained by our first step of faith has never actually been under threat though at times it has seemed to be.

So where do we go from here? Most of our struggle to live our Christian lives victoriously has done little more than reveal our total personal inadequacy to do so. The last thing I need is a set of prescriptions or obligations. I know by now, if this is all Paul has to offer me, I will do another round of trying and failing. Another form of law spells another cycle of defeat. I can’t do it. I am helpless. There is nothing good in me. My body of flesh is a failure. I am stuck with it. It has strived and strained to produce a form of righteousness but every effort ended in defeat.

For me personally I found salvation by faith alone 40 years ago. Then I set out to follow what I thought was the highest ideal – foreign missions. But have only served in foreign missions for 5 ½ of those years. The rest of that time has been striving, struggle and eight episodes of depression. I am not successful. Yet I do believe I have dwelt in God’s mercy, grace and love all that time despite my repeated failures. What now? A new strategy? A new mission’s method? A new ‘law’ of mission? No, no and no. The apostle Paul has an entirely new way of life for me and for all who would venture past the struggles of Rom 1-11 and beyond into chapters 12-16. This new way must begin with an event. “Offer yourself as a living sacrifice.” After I step off that altar of sacrifice, I will enter a new way of life. My new life will be not primarily that of service, but it will be a life of worship. My whole life on the other side of that altar will become a worship glorifying God. To enter this type of life requires leaving something behind on that altar – that which caused our defeat before we got on that altar.

What does it mean to ‘offer yourself as a living sacrifice”? Aren’t sacrifices by their nature slain, dead? Yes indeed. Those who sin under law require a blood sacrifice to atone for their sin. But before the law was given, Abraham became our father by faith. In obedience to God Abraham bound his son Isaac on an altar intending to slay him. But God stopped him as his knife was poised. God accepted his sacrifice, but Isaac remained alive. This event was a ‘living sacrifice’. From this event we get insight into Paul’s intention behind the phrase.

Consider Abraham. He became a believer by faith, and he stepped out of his father’s land for a land of promise. He was justified by faith - Rom 4:4, he set out on a journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan, a journey of faith and a journey of testing and struggle and failure as he sought to live by faith in God’s promise of descendants and a land. He struggled as does everyone who sets out to live by faith. And he failed. When he yielded to his flesh and his natural mind, he produced Ishmael who became bad fruit for himself and his descendants. But faith again prevailed and yielded another son, Isaac, a fruit of faith. What a joy. What a victory of faith. Abraham loved and cherished him and nurtured him in faith and God’s promises. Surely Abraham could stride on, son Isaac at his side, into the fulfilment of all God’s promises. No, there was another test. One that would take the knife to the heart of father and son to separate the natural love of their flesh and yield their fleshly longings to God. Abraham was told by God to take the son whom He loved and offer him as a sacrifice on the mountain God would show them. Genesis 22:2. What a journey of anguish that must have been. Each step a tearing away of every longing of his flesh and yielding of every desire to God. What went through Abraham’s mind as Isaac asked, ‘Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’? Genesis 22:7

Isaac was a fit, strong boy of 12, his father into his 100’s. He could easily have run from his father. But there is no hint of struggle. Both father and son yielded to the will of God. What a blessing to have Godly parents. What a head-start in life. Abraham was over 100 before he was ready for this test but Isaac only 12, yet he also yields to the will of God. What a glorious scene of anguish and yielding as father raises the knife over him whom he loves, and all natural love and longing and personal ambition is slain.

But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham… do not lay a hand on the boy.” Gen 22:11,12. It was a test. But more than that, it was a separation of the heart of flesh. They would leave behind on that mount all longings of their flesh. And God provided in place of Isaac an unblemished ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He shed the blood of this substitute ram. Two thousand years later on that same mount God would provide the ultimate sacrificial lamb, His own Son. Then He would not spare Him but received the blood of His son as atonement for all sin, of all who would have the faith of Abraham. (Rom 8:32). His Son would absorb the fruits of the flesh of Abraham and Isaac and of all their spiritual descendants to the present day and beyond.

As father and son step away from that mount and return to Sarah, they are not the same. They are free, set apart, holy and sanctified, made ready to carry the promise and bear fruit of faith to the next generation. They have both become true patriarchs of faith.

There comes a time in a believer’s life, beyond conversion and youthful zeal, beyond struggle and failure, beyond being filled with the Spirit and onto an altar to offer oneself as a living sacrifice. When our striving is found to contain more of the flesh than we realised before, and when our successes are found to be vain idols and our strategies are shown up to be more of our minds and not much of the Spirit, then we stop. And God shows us an altar – a time and a place to throw away all our trophies and separate our hearts to Him. This becomes our ‘spiritual worship’. This becomes true freedom for our hearts. We are separated to His service, our striving ceases. Our hearts are stilled, agendas left behind. We are free to be led by the Spirit, without the pull of our flesh as before. Personal ambition is left behind. We have no need of citing past achievements. Our focus is on Him whom we serve.

How do we now worship? We step off that altar into a yielded life, a holy life, separated to Him. Our separation is not just from our flesh but also from the world. Rom 12:2. No longer do we adopt the models of the world to frame our work. We now see through these ways of operating. Before they held appeal, they worked, they offered success. But on the other side of that altar every activity moulded after the pattern of the world is seen for what is really is – sin. (Rom 14:23). It is not a product of faith, so it is shed and left at that altar. Our renewed mind discerns the futility of the ways of the world and refuses to get caught up in them again. Instead he tests and approves what is God’s will and is satisfied with only His good, pleasing and perfect will. Rom 12:2

As he seeks this pathway, he remains alert to that most primal of sins – pride – which can easily and subtly rise in his heart. He is tempted to look sideways at others and compare himself and find himself better or ‘more spiritual’ than another. Danger again lurks – king pride – from the devil himself. He is being targeted with temptations from flesh, the world and the devil. There is no let up. He gets his eyes back on God and, if there are any assessments let them be “according to the measure of faith God has given you.” Rom 12:3

Aware of and alert to all three sources of temptation Paul directs us to the context of our ‘spiritual worship’. We are an integrated part of a body and we find our call and function in the context of others in the Body of Christ. We are dependent on them and they on us as we each perform our service according to the gifts which have been given to us. The new model by which we understand our role is that of the human body with each of its integrated organs working interdependently of each other. There is no more isolation but belonging. There is no more self-sufficiency but mutual contribution – both giving and receiving. The static models of the world have no place with their competition and self-seeking, their position holding and status, their differential reward and material accumulation. All these things are discarded. They are replaced by the exercise of gifts. Each gift is given according to His grace, not according to anything we have done to earn it. It is grace, undeserved and free. There is no room for boasting here.

Gods gifts include prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership and showing mercy. Note that leadership is not at the head of this list. That would be where the world puts it. There is only one head, Jesus Christ. All others are interdependent organs including leadership, with no hierarchy intended. All are functions of service. None are positions of status. There is no place for personal ambition. Rom 12:6-8

Paul writes on with more detail of our functioning in the Body. Sincere love is our motive etc. All these exhortations and instructions are not a set of ‘how-to’s’ to live the Christian life. If we treat them that way, we revert to a form of law and we will soon find ourselves back in Romans 7 on another cycle of defeat. Rather the instructions are what God’s grace enables us to do in whatever situation we find ourselves. Most often He will lead us into the place of service in accordance with the gift(s) He has given us. As we function in our gift it is without striving but as a channel of His grace to others – blessing others and being blessed by them.

We may do similar things that we did before but our motives and that which drives us will never be the same after we act on Pauls appeal in Romans 12:1 to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice.

Outline of Romans

1:1-17 Summary 1:16

1:18 - 3:20 Sin 3:20

3:21 – 4 Saved by Faith 3:28

5 – 7 Struggle 5:3,4

8 Spirit 8:9

9 – 11 Selection 9:15,16

12 – 16 Service 12:1

Paul Duncan

December 2019

LIVING SACRIFICE – ROMANS 12:1

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The book of Romans seems to follow stages in the life of a believer leading up to Rom 12:1

Stage

1. 1:17 to 3:20 Awareness of sin
2. 3:21 to 4 Righteousness through faith
3. 5 to 7 Struggling with sin and putting on the new life
4. 8 Filled with the Spirit
5. 9-11 God’s sovereign mercy in salvation
6. Identify a time in your life which illustrates each of these five stages.
7. What area of Abraham’s heart did God test when He asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac?
8. How tough do you think this test was for Abraham?
9. How might his heart be different after he passed this test?
10. What test have you been through?
11. What good thing might God be asking you to let go?
12. God provided Abraham with an unblemished ram, a substitute sacrifice. God has provided a substitute for us – the unblemished lamb of God sacrificed for us. How might the death of Jesus be applied to your test.
13. After His sacrificial death God raised Jesus from the dead. How might your life be changed after your test?
14. In what way do you need to stop conforming to the pattern of the world? Rom 12:2
15. What is your new ‘sober judgement’ of your self in accordance with ‘the measure of faith God has given you? Rom 12:3