

Romans 12:1-2 'Living for God'

We all have our favourite songs; one of mine is a golden oldie. It was penned by a lady who was born in 1836, and who died 43 years later in 1879 - her name, Francis Ridley Havergal. Her father was the vicar of Astley in Worcestershire. She loved her middle name, Ridley ... named after Nicholas Ridley who, along with Hugh Latimer, was burned at the stake in Oxford in 1555.

It's worth noting that she was one of a trio of famous Fanny's - the other two were the blind hymnwriter, Fanny Crosby, and then there was the Bishop of Derry's wife, Mrs Francis Alexander. Miss Havergal was an accomplished musician: she loved to play the great old hymns of the faith - she loved to sing of her Lord and Saviour. In her mid-30s, she was challenged to give her all to Jesus Christ, to take the plunge, and that's when she penned the familiar words:

Take my life, and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee; take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise. She went on to write: Take my hands, my feet, my voice, my lips, my silver and my gold, my intellect, my will, and my heart. She finished with these words: Take my love, my Lord, I pour, at thy feet its treasure store; take myself, and I will be, ever, only, all, for thee.

Those words are an echo of Romans 12:1-2 - she took them at face value, turned them into poetry, and set them to music ... now, in light of that, the question is: Why break the habits of a lifetime? Why do I say that? Because Paul has his way of doing things.

In every one of his epistles, be they long or short, Paul has a major doctrinal section followed by a hard hitting practical section—it's what we believe followed by how we behave. You see, living for Jesus is all about knowing and doing! And that comes across so powerfully in the verses we're looking at this morning. This is where faith gets real - this is shoe-leather Christianity.

We leave eleven chapters of Bible doctrine behind us—eleven chapters where Paul has covered so much ground ... he has given us remarkable insights into the foundational truths of the gospel by looking at sin, at justification, at sanctification, at glorification, and at the sovereignty of God in it all. He has shown us God's eternal purpose for man and for the world in which we live.

Paul doesn't stop with the benediction at the end of Romans 11. Far from it! He says, 'Look folks, if that's the kind of God we have, then here's the kind of people he wants you and I to be!' We know the truth, let's apply it!

The God we meet in Romans is a relational God—he's a God who thrives on fellowship, on having a healthy, warm relationship with his redeemed people. If he's like that, and he is, he then expects us to reflect that mindset in our dealings with one another. In your life and mine, the punchline is: **right relationships mean right living!**

Paul starts where we expect him to start—in verses 1 and 2, he homes in on our relationship

with God. He kick starts the chapter with the word 'therefore'. When we see that word in the Bible, it's good to stop and ask ourselves the question: what's it there for? It implies that what he's just about to say has a link, a connection, with all that he's just been saying. It's not an addendum, it's not an afterthought - rather, it goes with the flow!

Actually, this is the fourth 'therefore' in the epistle: the first is in 3:20, it's the 'therefore' of **condemnation**; the second in 5:1 is the 'therefore' of **justification**; the third is in 8:1, it's the 'therefore' of **assurance**; number four is right here in 12:1, and it's the 'therefore' of **total dedication**.

Says Paul in the NLT: 'And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.'

A quick look at this duo of verses tells me that serving Jesus, living for Jesus, walking with Jesus, is no easy option. It's not fluffy pillows and soft leather recliners. It's not wall to wall sunshine. No! Certainly not. If that's what it's not, let me tell

you what it is: it's a clear, clarion call to sacrificial living and sacrificial service—and that will cost. There's a price to pay!

Have you ever watched a pigeon and wondered why it walks so funny? Ornithologists, people who know a lot about birds, tell us that a pigeon's peculiar gait allows it to see where it's going. A pigeon can't adjust its focus while on the move, so in-between steps it comes to a complete stop, it pauses, it refocuses on the ground, and only then does it take the next step.

It seems to me, there are times in your life and mine when it's good for us to adopt the pigeon mindset—we need to stop every once in a while, catch our breath, and simply refocus ... refocus our thinking and renew our level of commitment!

The big challenge is this: what kind of a sacrifice does Paul want us to make? He says four things about it, you can follow them easily in the text!

First and foremost, **it's a living sacrifice!** It is true that some Christians lay down their lives for the sake of the glorious gospel of Christ. These brave men and women voluntarily pay the ultimate sacrifice and become martyrs in the process.

The facts speak for themselves—did you know, there were more Christians murdered for their faith in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries? The figures are staggering! in

fact, in 2021, last year, we are told that 1 in 7 believers around the world, suffered significant persecution for their faith in Jesus.

According to the Open Doors World Watch List, on top of the figure I've just given you, there was an average of more than 16 believers killed every single day in 2021 for following Jesus. At least 75% of those were in Nigeria. That said, the most hostile and dangerous place today to love Jesus is Afghanistan under the Taliban. North Korea is second on the list, followed by Somalia.

Having said that, most of us will not be called to suffer that fate; however, all of us are called to be living sacrifices. In 'view of God's mercy' we are to 'offer our bodies' as 'living sacrifices'. Wow! That's where the rubber hits the road for you and me!

This is where Paul gets up-close and personal, he doesn't beat about the bush, for he tells it like it is. God is looking for ordinary people, folks like you and me, who are committed and consecrated.

And we do it, not because a preacher comes along on a Sunday morning and sends us on a guilt trip; no! we do it, because we are motivated by gratitude, by thankfulness, by appreciation - it's the least we can do, says Paul, in view of all that God has done for us! The old hymn tells us to 'count our blessings' - well, that's what Paul says right here - we are to recall the abundant mercies of the Lord in each of our lives, they're new every morning, then surrender all.

A living sacrifice—that's hard, it's really tough! The problem is a living sacrifice keeps crawling off the altar! It's OK one day, we have to make sure we stay there the next day! And the day after. And the day after that. It's 24/7. At the same time, a living sacrifice speaks softly and tenderly of the grace and mercy of God. It's a poignant reminder of Isaac in the OT and the Lord Jesus on Calvary - both are seen as 'living' sacrifices!

The story is told of Adoniram Judson, he was an American missionary to Burma, now known as Myanmar. He was there for 40 years in the early 1800s. He endured tremendous hardships while trying to reach the local people for Jesus Christ. He spent 17 months in Ava Prison where he was terribly mistreated. For the rest of his life, he carried the scars from the chains and iron shackles that were used to bind him.

Upon his release, Judson courageously asked for permission to go to another province to preach the gospel. The ruler of Burma denied his request; this is what he said: 'my people are not fools enough to listen to anything a missionary might say, but I fear they might be impressed by your scars and turn to your religion.'

A lady asked her pastor on one occasion: 'What does it mean to be a living sacrifice?' He held out a blank sheet of paper, and replied: 'It's to sign

your name at the bottom of this blank sheet, and let God fill it in as he wills.' You see, in the OT, the worshipper brought a sacrifice. In the NT, the worshipper becomes a sacrifice - that's the mega difference Jesus makes!

A living sacrifice. That's good for starters! Paul moves on to tell us, secondly, that it has to be a 'holy' sacrifice.

That word 'holy' means to be set apart, to be used exclusively for the purpose of God. As and when we give our lives to Jesus Christ, we are handing over the reins of our lives to him. We are more or less saying: 'Lord, it's over to you. My life is in your hands, you do with it whatever you want to do with it!' God does not want something from you, he wants you!

Our all is on the altar—it's 100 percent commitment to Jesus. Everything has been handed over to him. I mean, everything! That means, God has first call on our lives—it's up to him to do what he wants to do with us, it's up to him to use us as he sees best. It's no longer what I want to do with my life—it's what God wants to do with my life!

A living sacrifice. A holy sacrifice. It's also a sacrifice that, thirdly, is 'pleasing to God'. Ever wondered, how can the sacrifice of my life be pleasing to the Lord? Well, you only have to take a look at Cain and Abel in Genesis 4!

Both men brought a sacrifice, but only one was acceptable to God! And it wasn't Cain's! He pushed his luck when he thought God would be impressed with his horticultural produce. Nice work, good work, but not what God wanted.

Abel's was first class, his was spot on—his was an offering by faith. And that element of faith made the world of difference. We know that from Hebrews 11:4.

So it is in your life and mine—it's only as we surrender our all to the Lord in an act of faith that we win God's smile of approval. He's not so much interested in what we have to offer to him - it's the 'nothing in my hands I bring' attitude, he wants you for who you are and for what he knows you can become.

Paul finishes the verse by encouraging us to do just that as, fourthly, it is a 'spiritual act of worship'. Amazing, isn't it! Our surrender to God is an act of worship. It's reasonable, it's logical, and it's no more and no less than God expects of each of us as his children.

That raises worship to a brand new level; most of us tend to see worship as something we do in church on a Sunday when we sing hymns, and pray, and give our offering. Well, in one sense, it is, but worship is so much more—it's when we consecrate ourselves to Jesus and that impacts my life on a Monday morning. In salvation, we

receive everything from God - being a sacrifice is when we give everything back to God!

Paul ups the ante when he challenges us to get our act together in verse 2. He doesn't want us to model our life after the ways of this world; it was J B Phillips who said, "don't let the world squeeze you into its mould." Rather, he wants us to fashion our lives in the image of Jesus Christ. He is the greatest role model of all time. Before him, all else fades into oblivion and pales into insignificance.

The world has its mould and the Christian should have no part in it—it won't do us any good, either in the short term or long term. In fact it will lead us further away from God and that spells danger and disaster! In this world, God is looking for people who will stand out in the crowd, he's looking for non-conformers!

He also wants us to experience a personal metamorphosis, for that's what Paul means when he talks about being 'transformed by the renewing of your mind.' That describes a change from within. It's what takes place when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. You see, the world wants to change your mind so it exerts pressure from the outside—but the Holy Spirit changes your mind by doing something from the inside.

He gives us a new perspective on life, he gives us a fresh insight into global events, he gives us a reason for living—as we apply the word of God to our lives we become more spiritual in our

thinking. A clear mind, a clean mind, a God-centred mind is what Paul is on about in verse 2.

Right thinking leads to right living.

When we go down that road we experience life in a new dimension, we discover that God's will is something refreshingly dynamic and positive—it's always for our good, we benefit enormously from doing what God wants us to do and being what God wants us to be. I suppose Joseph is a superb example of that - others had their agenda for him and they did the dirty on him - but he testified that 'God meant it for good' (Genesis 50:20). So ...

when bad things happen to God's good people, we need to reiterate this gloriously glowing truth - it's for our good because the Lord is good!

And, at the end of the day, it brings joy and pleasure into our lives! Nothing boring about serving Jesus! There's no drudge in walking with the King! It's exciting, it's rejuvenating, it's what life is all about in 2022!

We can look at it like this: the basis of our commitment is the mercy of God—the greater our comprehension of what God has done for us, the greater our commitment should be.

The character of our commitment is summed up in two words—it is total and it is reasonable! It's all for Jesus! And it makes a lot of sense to do it!

The demands of our commitment are echoed in two commands in verse 2—one negative, do not conform to the world; and one positive, be

transformed! We say 'no' to the world and 'yes' to Jesus Christ.

The effect of our commitment is seen in our life and lifestyle as we wholeheartedly embrace the will of God. And here's the only gap we need to keep in mind: the will of God is good, acceptable, and perfect!

It seems to me, the only way to live, to really live, in the twenty first century, is for us to live our lives sold out to Jesus Christ! Full surrender! Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else!

That's what inspired Isaac Watts to write: *When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of Glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride. Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Shall have my heart, my life, my all.*