

Liturgist into:

Psalm 145 invites us to consider the comprehensive sweep of God's rule in the world. Similar to other acrostic psalms, each line begins with the subsequent letter in the Hebrew alphabet. More than simply a mnemonic device, however, such a construction points to a careful and deliberate reflection on the topic at hand: God's rule in the world. To underscore the sweeping nature of God's divine kingship, the Hebrew term for "all" appears 17 times throughout the 21 verses. At times, it refers to God and God's actions in the world, while at other times, it refers to those who are the recipients of those actions. The final verse announces that "all" flesh will bless God's name. From beginning to end, this psalm is relentless in its confession of the authority of God above everyone and everything.

### **Hear from Psalm 145:8-14 (NIV)**

8 The Lord is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and rich in love.  
9 The Lord is good to all;  
he has compassion on all he has made.  
10 All your works praise you, Lord;  
your faithful people extol you.  
11 They tell of the glory of your kingdom  
and speak of your might,  
12 so that all people may know of your mighty acts  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures through all generations.  
The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises  
and faithful in all he does.  
14 The Lord upholds all who fall  
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

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In his letter to the Corinthians Paul questions whether it is permissible for believers to eat meat in pagan temple dining areas that remains after animal sacrifices have been made. Those who refuse to eat such meat consider it a matter of conscience. Essentially, Paul argues that because idols have no real existence, one has freedom in regard to this. Nevertheless, out of love and regard for the other person for whom it is a matter of conscience, one who claims such freedom should be willing to relinquish it.

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-3 (NIV)**

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God.

**Freedom** is something we can claim and something we can proclaim. Paul launches the fifth chapter of his letter to the Galatians with the word freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free.” For freedom. What does that mean exactly?

For Paul, freedom is not simply a gift we are given, but a responsibility placed in our hands.

The question isn’t really “Are you free?” or “How free are you?” For Paul, the question is, “What are you going to do with your freedom?” There is a choice to be made. What will you choose? Here again, Paul talks about what his understanding of what a gift that comes from the Spirit, or from Christ, really is and what it isn’t. First of all, a true gift of the Spirit isn’t for you. It isn’t about making the recipient better or more whole or more holy. A gift is given to build up the community of faith. That’s the test of the spiritual gift: Is the whole body of Christ enhanced by this gift? If it makes the receiver somehow better but doesn’t affect anyone else, then it isn’t really from God. God’s gifts are meant to be shared. They are meant to be used for others.

The gift of freedom is to be used in service to others. Paul even goes further; we are to become slaves to one another. That seems like the opposite of freedom. And this grows out of the law, which Paul sums up as, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14). Of course, he understands that is only half of the law, but it is the half he is dealing with now. How do we live in human relationships or in community with one another?

This is the freedom Paul celebrates in this text. And, it could be the freedom we celebrate as we commemorate Independence Day. It is the freedom to care for others, the freedom to see all people as equals in the sight of law and the eyes of God. It is the freedom to serve not because you have to but because you get to; not because you have a duty to fulfill, but because you have a love to put into action. We are free not to live independent of one another, caring only for ourselves, but we are free to acknowledge our interdependence and how our own personal good comes to us from many others, even as we contribute to the good of others.

That leads me to celebrate **the Bill of Rights**.

Toward the end of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, George Mason, a delegate from Virginia, proposed adding a bill of rights, which would, he argued, give great quiet to the people” and “might be prepared in a few hours.”

The state delegations unanimously rejected Mason’s proposal. Some delegates reasoned that a federal bill of rights was unnecessary because most state constitutions already included some form of guaranteed rights; others said that outlining certain rights would imply that those were the only rights reserved to the people. However, historian Richard Beeman, a former Trustee of the National Constitution Center, has pointed out a much more prosaic reason the delegates were so skeptical: They had spent four arduous months of contentious debate in a hot, stuffy room, and were anxious to avoid anything that would prolong the convention. They wanted to go home, so they took a pass. A bill of rights was overruled.

The Constitution was signed by 39 delegates on September 17, 1787, at the Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall, in Philadelphia. Three delegates were present but refused to sign, in part because of the absence of a bill of rights: George Mason, Edmund Randolph, and Elbridge Gerry.

After the Convention, the absence of a bill of rights emerged as a central part of the ratification debates. Anti-Federalists, who opposed ratification, viewed its absence as a fatal flaw. Several states ratified the Constitution on the condition that a bill of rights would be promptly added, and many even offered suggestions for what to include.

Pauline Maier, author of *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787–1788*, noted of these proponents of a bill of rights:

“Without their determined opposition, the first ten amendments would not have become a part of the Constitution for later generations to transform into a powerful instrument for the defense of American freedom. . . . Their example might well be their greatest gift to posterity.”

From a devotional from Asbury Seminary:

“[The] overarching purpose [of the] Bill of Rights [was] not established to create a national ethos of unfettered individual freedom to justify doing just about everything under the sun under the auspices of one’s individual rights regardless of the offense or injury it may cause to others. The Bill of Rights was established to protect the citizenry from the government. Freedom of religion and freedom of speech and the right to bear arms and to be free from unreasonable search and seizure and so forth are not meant to establish [total] individual autonomy. They are meant to foster the common good and a government by the people for the people.

Free speech has nothing to do with a sacrilegious art display or [a swear word] on [a] t-shirt, and everything to do with the ability to voice a contrary opinion about [elected officials] without being arrested for it. These rights are for the flourishing and preservation of a certain kind of community. They are for the sake of one another far more than for my individual ability to do whatever the heck I want to do. We have run far amuck of our founders’ intention because these rights have become far more about ourselves as individuals than our relationships with one another. We think we know something, but do not yet know as we ought to know.

The issue is not our rights but our relationships. The issue is not knowledge of the law but knowing one another. We have not been rescued and set free from sin for freedom’s sake but for the love of God and the love of neighbor.

## THE PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Yes, Lord, knowledge is good but love is infinitely better. I ask you for the gift of the humility of Jesus, to have the mind of Christ, that I might learn to handle knowledge with love. I confess my pride as sin; even more I confess that most of my pride is yet hidden from me. Come Holy Spirit, and gently reveal my pride and give me the grace to repent. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.”