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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-24-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Second Samuel chapter 7. Then we move to the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans and conclude with the Gospel lesson from the Gospel of Saint Luke. Christmas is only one from this Sunday's lesson, so we pray that all of you have a very Merry Christmas.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Samuel. This is the second Book following First Samuel and was originally one Book until the separation made by the translators of the Greek Old Testament known as the Septuagint. First and Second Samuel was written by an unknown author and chronicled the events from the birth of the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1-28) until the last words of King David (2 Samuel 23:1-7). First Samuel opens with a description of the corruption of the Levitical priesthood (1 Samuel 2:12-17) and the threats from Israel's main enemy the Philistines who captured the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 4). One of the main things that happened in these two Books was the pronouncement by God of the Davidic Covenant. This is the Covenant which is God's promises to David made through Nathan and found in 2 Samuel 7, the text of today's reading.

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Note: The intervening verses that were skipped in the reading were included below in order to provide the full context and meaning.

First Reading:

> *1 Now it came about when the king lived in his house, and the LORD had given him rest on every side from all his enemies, 2 that the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within tent curtains." 3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your mind, for the LORD is with you." 4 But in the same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying, 5 "Go and say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD, "Are you the one who should build Me a house to dwell in? 6 For I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent, even in a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'"' 8 "Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. 9 I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth. 10 I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, 11 even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you. 12 When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, 15 but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."'" (2 Samuel 7:1-16).*

According to the rules given to Moses, the glory of the Lord's dwelling place was in the tabernacle, but King David desired to build a temple for God (v. 2). Nathan the Prophet told David instead that the Lord would make a house for him (v. 11) and that his descendent (whom we know was his son Solomon) would be the one to build the temple of God (vv. 12-13). The promises of God to David as relayed by the Prophet Nathan included first, that David would have rest from his enemies (v. 11), that his descendent would build a temple of God (vv. 12-13), and finally that the "throne of David" would be established forever (v. 13 b). We understand that after God later revealed the mystery (as we will see in the second reading), the One who would sit upon the throne wasn't King David's son

Solomon, but the Lord Jesus Himself. Verse 14 is a description of Jesus' Second Advent, the coming rulership of Jesus during his coming earthly reign as we see confirmed by Revelation 12:5, "And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne." Israel is the one who gave birth to Jesus, and at His First Advent He was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9). Jesus is the One that will sit on the Throne of David. Although Mary was the earthly host of Jesus, He was born as a child of the Nation of Israel, "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1). Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews, and through the mystery of the church the Messiah of the Gentiles as well.

As you were reading the verses from 2 Samuel, it can be confusing as to whether the author was speaking about King David or the coming Messiah, the Son of David. The people in King David's era hearing Samuel's prophecies may have desired to see David's greater son and believed that somehow Solomon would reign forever. However, Jesus is the One called the Son of David. In the opening of Matthew's Gospel Jesus is called the Son of David (Matthew 1:1). Later in Matthew Chapter 9 two blind men called out, "Have mercy on us Son of David" (Matthew 9:27). Even those that doubted knew Jesus' identity. At one point after Jesus had performed great miracles the crowd called out, "this man cannot be the Son of David, can he?" (Matthew 12:23b). When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowd cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9). Jesus had a messianic title, and was the One to whom was promised His reign would endure forever (2 Samuel 7:13).

As we celebrate Christmas tomorrow, this is the Royal Person that we commemorate being born in the manger, where all ceremonial lambs are born. After Jesus' resurrection, He "sat down at the right hand of the Father" (Hebrews 10:12), "having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time" (Ibid). He is "waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET" (Hebrews 10:13). "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:13). Paul said that salvation is a free gift that comes through faith. "8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). No matter how hard we try, Jesus' work is still finished for us. We walk in the strength of God's power for His purposes as we see in the very next verse of Ephesians. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). As believers, we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, as Paul said in Chapter 1 of Ephesians. "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). These are the spiritual truths that we are celebrating during Christmas.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move on to the second reading from the closing version of the Paul's Letter to the Romans, we see that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus was the fulfillment of a great mystery that wasn't understood until after He came. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was something that was hidden in the former times, but is now understood, a mystery revealed by God through Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

> *25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27)*

The Good News (or Gospel) is appointed as a light to all the nations (v. 26d) which leads to the obedience of faith (v. 26e). Although this was a mystery in the ages past (v. 25b), it was manifested both by the many prophetic verses in the Scriptures and through the voice of the Prophets as we saw in the first reading. Paul said more about this mystery Ephesians:

> *2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; (Ephesians 3:2-5)*

The salvation of the Gentiles through Jesus' sacrifice and the church age was a mystery that wasn't revealed until after Jesus came. Although the prophecies were there concerning the ingrafting of the Gentiles into God's kingdom (see for example Isaiah 56:6-8 "foreigners," the salvation of the Gentile Rahab in Joshua 2:9-11, the salvation of the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah). Isaiah was more explicit about this coming salvation for the Gentiles. He said about Jesus, the Root of Jesse, "And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10). Again, these are the spiritual truths that we celebrate during Christmas

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Luke and records the miraculous event of the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary.

Gospel Reading:

> *26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; 33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. 36 And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)*

Many points arise from the reading. First, Mary is called the "favored one" in verse 28. She said about herself later in this chapter, "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondslave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed" (Luke 1:48). One can hardly imagine the calling which God placed her to be the bearer of the Son of God. In the reading, God called Mary who found favor with God who was to be the bearer of God's Son Jesus who would through the "ark" (see below) of His bodily sacrifice save the world from their sin. Jesus was conceived not through normal human means but through the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 34). Mary, was obviously very perplexed at all that was happening and called out to the Angel to explain these things (v. 34), who was more than glad to do so. Second, Mary's Son would be called "the Son of God" (v. 35) and the Lord would give to him the throne of David (v. 32), the fulfillment of the prophecy that we saw in the first reading. Finally, Mary (and Joseph) were obedient to God in naming their Son Jesus, and Mary promised her obedience to God by calling herself "bondslave of the Lord" (v. 37). By the way, Jesus is from the Hebrew name "Jeshua," which means "the Lord is Salvation." Jesus is the salvation of the entire world, which is why we are so pleased to

celebrate His birth on Christmas.

Noah, who came centuries before, was also called "blessed", and it was through the righteous and faithful acts of Noah that the world was saved from the flood. God said, "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). Noah built an ark to save the people of the world from the wrath of God that was to literally be poured out through the Flood. The Blessed Mary on the other hand, bore the Son of God to be the ark of salvation for all who would believe. These similarities between Noah and Mary are important because they show how these two people were obedient to the difficult challenges that God placed upon their lives. Although it's okay to ask questions when we discern the calling that God places upon **our** lives, it's also crucially important as believers to carry out His instructions.

While many of us are already familiar with the narrative concerning the birth of Jesus, this passage highlights important truths for our lives. First, Saint Luke brought out the fact that Jesus was born not through natural human relations but through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. This is important because since God is without sin this was the only means by which the sinless God-Man could come into the world. Second, since the virgin birth was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy we can trust other prophecies that speak to areas of our life and ministry. This includes things like how the second coming of the Lord will play out, how the world will be eventually unified under Jesus' earthly reign. Third, Jesus was sent to save His people from their sins. This is God's special invitation to counteract the destructive nature of sin in order to stand before a Holy God and not be rejected at the judgment. This is not only "a" plan for salvation, it is "the" plan. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

May you and your family have a very Merry Christmas.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, what began as a promise that David's son (we know as Solomon) would build a temple for God (v. 13a) expanded into a throne that would endure forever (v. 13b). The temple is a place where people gather to worship God, and in the Old Testament was a place inside of which God's Spirit dwelled. We know the ruler of the temple is Jesus forever, but how can the throne of the temple endure forever, when we know that it was destroyed in 586 BC and again in AD70?

2. In light of your answer to the first question, read what Saint Paul had to say in the Letters to the Corinthians. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1Corinthians 6:19). "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people'" (2 Corinthians 6:16).

How would you change your answer in light of the spiritual truth that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit on which Jesus is (and will) reign forever?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-17-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah and then move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with the Gospel lesson John's Gospel concerning John the Baptist.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 61. The first verse and a portion of the second were the ones that Jesus read while He was teaching in the temple as is recorded in Luke 4:18. It is important to note that Jesus stopped reading halfway through verse two because the subsequent verses dealt with His Second Advent. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see this, although His listeners would not have been able to catch this important detail (see for example John 12:16). The verses in question (2b – 9) were omitted from the text of the reading covered in the Mass, although we have included them below in the section that is separated by the blank line. These intermediate verses (2b – 9) won't be fulfilled until after the church age when God pours out His judgment upon the earth during the tribulation period of the end times. As you read this Old Testament prophecy from the Prophet Isaiah, you can almost imagine Jesus standing in the temple proclaiming His Word.

First Reading:

> *1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; 2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD*

Omitted section:

> *And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To grant those who mourn in Zion, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. 4 Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations; And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. 5 Strangers will stand and pasture your flocks, And foreigners will be your farmers and your vinedressers. 6 But you will be called the priests of the LORD; You will be spoken of as ministers of our God. You will eat the wealth of nations, And in their riches you will boast. 7 Instead of your shame you will have a double portion, And instead of humiliation they will shout for joy over their portion. Therefore they will possess a double portion in their land, Everlasting joy will be theirs. 8 For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense And make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Then their offspring will be known among the nations, And their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them Because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed.*
>
> *10 I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom*

> *decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:1-11)*

God revealed to Isaiah some important truths about the ministry of the Messiah Jesus. First, the Spirit of the Lord would dwell upon Him (v. 1). This truth is corroborated in the New Testament by eyewitnesses to Jesus' baptism during His time on earth. The baptism of Jesus was recorded in three of the four Gospels. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist said this about Jesus' baptism: "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him" (John 1:32). Jesus, as God in the flesh, was in union with both the Spirit of God and God the Father as we find in the chronicle of Jesus' baptism. Saint Matthew detailed the event as follows. "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'" (Matthew 3;16-17). Here, the entire Trinity of God is present. Jesus is being baptized, the Spirit descends upon Him, and the Father announces His pleasure in the Son.

Isaiah announced a second truth from God about the Messiah (that was of course yet future in his day) and provided some details about His ministry. The Messiah would be appointed by the LORD to do the following:

- "To bring good news to the afflicted" (v. 1b). Jesus brought the "Gospel," a word which means "good news." The Gospel was the good news for those who (and are) being afflicted, or poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3).

- "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted" (v. 1c). Jesus was the spiritual healer. When someone heals an injured person's wounds, they "bind them up." Jesus did this to the injured world's heart. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12, we will read this in context during the Gospel lesson).

- "To proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners" (v. 1e-ff). The world has been held captive by sin, Jesus came to redeem the world and to free everyone held captive by it.

- "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD" (v. 2a). The coming of the Messiah, Jesus was the most "favorable year of the LORD" since the creation of the universe. Had the people accepted Jesus as their Messiah, Jesus' eternal reign would have begun. Jesus' coming would fulfill an untold number of Old Testament prophecies and open the way to the future renewal of the world through worldwide peace in the Millennial and eternal kingdoms.

Finally, if we move to the closing verses 10-11, we see some additional detail about the future ministries of Jesus as follows:

- The Messiah will give those who trust in Him a reason to rejoice: They will exalt the Name of the Lord in whose righteousness they will be adorned. "I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (v. 10).

- In the future, the world will be a place of universal righteousness and the earth's curse will be reversed. "For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations" (v. 11).

The intermediate verses that were omitted in the Mass reading explain more about Jesus' ministry, but these details are concerned with things that will happen after His Second Coming.

- After the Day of the Lord, referred as "the day of vengeance of our God" (v. 2), Jesus will comfort all those who mourn because of the terrible series of events that unfolded on the earth (v. 3). Part of what will happen during that time is terrible persecution of believers alive during that time. We see in the Book of Revelation how God comforts those who were martyred for their faith during this Great Tribulation period. "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud

voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9-10).

- The war torn world will be rebuilt after the devastation brought about by the AntiChrist and God's vengeance of his evil rulership of the global commercial empire and false religious empire known as "Mystery Babylon" (v. 4).

- Gentiles will be engrafted in the kingdom ("strangers," v. 5), as foretold by Paul in Romans 11:11-17. God will use the Jews' rejection of their Messiah during the unforeseen "church age" in order to bring the Gentiles into His eternal kingdom.

- The rightful priesthood will be restored to Israel with their honor restored with a double blessing (vv. 6-7). God said, "For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense and make an everlasting covenant with them. Then their offspring will be known among the nations, And their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them, because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed" (vv. 8-9).

That's a lot to digest. The key point of all of this is that the coming of the Messiah was a crucially important mystery that was fulfilled by the miraculous birth of Jesus that we will celebrate in just two short weeks from the date of these Sunday Mass study notes. We cannot under emphasize the importance of Jesus and as we transition to the second reading. Let's pause for a moment and ask God to help us to celebrate the upcoming holiday season with Jesus foremost in our minds.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's teaching on the upcoming calamity we mentioned in the first reading, the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Someone in Thessalonica had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here, Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). Chapter 5 opens with Paul's teaching on the **real** return of the Lord, for

those alive during that generation when God will outpour His wrath upon the unbelieving earth. During that time many will come to faith in the Lord Jesus during perhaps the greatest turning of people's hearts to God since the creation of the world. Paul addressed these future believers and told them that "God had not destined them to wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9) and provided a list of instructions to them (vv. 11-15) including, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people" (v. 15). It is in this context that Paul provided the following instructions that are applicable to believers of all ages, and especially to those undergoing terrible persecution in the last days.

Second Reading:

> *16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24)*

Paul directed the believers to live in a state of unceasing joy and thankfulness (vv. 16-18) while holding to the truths of the Gospel message (v. 20, "do not despise prophetic utterances"). Because of all the false teaching that will happen in that era (and is already happening now, 1 John 2:18), they are to "examine everything very carefully" and only adhere to those things that are actually true (v. 21b, "that which is good"). Finally, Paul pronounced a blessing upon them, wishing that God would find them blameless upon His return, and noted that the written prophecy regarding what would happen in these last days would indeed prove to be true (v. 24). Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians give guidance to us who would also live in the light of truth. We do not do these things in order to be saved, we live this way because we are saved. It is God who sanctifies us—literally, sets us apart—so that our lives reflect His value system when we do not quench the Spirit of God who lives inside us. God is faithful.

Paul's message is important to us as we move towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus by the blessed virgin Mary. God calls us as believers to remember the work that He has done through sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. During the Christmas season, we are to "set our sights upon Jesus." Although many in the world have set their sights upon Jesus in the manner of directing their weapons of unbelief against Him, Paul said that regardless of the circumstance and even in times of terrible persecution we are to "abstain from **every** form of evil" (v. 22, emphasis added).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson focuses on what John the Baptist did to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. John was a few months older than Jesus. They were cousins, so they very well could have spent time together as they were growing up and beginning to understand their unique place in God's redemptive plan. Today's reading concerns the prophecy about this John the Baptist.

Gospel Reading:

> *6 There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.*

> *19 This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. 27 It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:6-8, 19-28)*

John the Baptist wasn't the Light but came as a forerunner of Jesus, the Light (v. 6-8). John the Baptist's purpose was to testify about Jesus so that people may believe (v. 7b). When the Jewish leaders asked John who he was, they inquired about whether he was Elijah, or the prophet spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy. The Jews were aware of these two prophecies, first, that Elijah would return (Malachi 4:5) as well as the coming of a great prophet as predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. John answered them clearly by saying that he was neither the Christ (v. 20), Elijah (v. 21), or the prophet of Deuteronomy 18 (v. 22). Instead, he quoted from Isaiah 40, with which they would have been familiar, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD'" (v. 23). Isaiah's description of John the Baptist was very accurate, as he was the one proclaiming Jesus in the wilderness "beyond the Jordan" (v. 28). John told them that the

Messiah was among them, but they did not know Him (v. 26) and that he was unworthy of even untying His sandal (v. 27).

The reading skipped a large section of text including verses 9 – 18. We are covering these verses because they are not being covered during the Mass during any soon upcoming Sundays.

> *9 There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" 16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. 17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:9-18)*

Even though Jesus created the world, many of His own people rejected Him as the promised Messiah (v. 10 – 11). However, this didn't stop the plan of God to grant salvation to all who believe (v. 12). Jesus was the "Word that became flesh" that "dwelt among [the disciples]" (v. 14). He is the one about whom John the Baptist testified, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (v. 15). Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law (v. 17), and was the fleshly manifestation of God, because God the Father exists in the form of a Spirit that cannot be seen by man (v. 18). Jesus is eternal, because He existed before John the Baptist, although He was born physically some months after this greatest of men (Matthew 11:11). These are some profound truths that we can ponder as our lives move towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day.

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we learned about John the Baptist who came as the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the coming of a forerunner announcing the ministry of Jesus. Later in the Gospel, we learn that John's life was cut short by King Herod in an outright persecution for the content of John's message to repent. Jesus took over where John left off and continued the calling to

repent (Matthew 4:17), then His life was also cut short. What difference does knowing that **you** will be persecuted for your faith make in your life as you carry on this same message?

2. How does your understanding of the context of the second reading from Paul's First Letter to Thessalonians help you to place Christian persecution in a different context?

3. Review the list of what the Messiah was appointed for in the Old Testament passage of Isaiah. Pick one of the bullet points that resonate with you and talk to God about how this truth impacts you. Let God know that you want Jesus to be that kind of Messiah for you.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-05-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will see in the readings the frailty and difficulty of the Old Testament priesthood. We will learn about Paul's heart in serving the believers in Thessalonica and conclude with Jesus' teaching regarding the prideful religious leaders during the time of His earthly ministry.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The main theme of the Book of Malachi is the corruption that had occurred among the Levitical Priesthood. This was during the time just after the restoration of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem as recorded in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The priests were corrupt in many ways including offering as animal sacrifices those which were less than perfect such as the ones that were blind, lame, or sick (Ezra 1:8). As spiritual leaders, the corruption of the priests extended to the people who withheld their perfect animals and brought the imperfect ones to the them as a less than perfect offering. Such is the indictment brought by God in the opening verse.

First Reading:

Malachi 1:14 NAS95 14 "But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the LORD of hosts, "and My name is feared among the nations."

Malachi 2:1-2 NAS95 1 "And now this commandment is for you, O priests. 2 "If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says the LORD of hosts, "then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart.

Malachi 2:8-10 NAS95 8 "But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the LORD of hosts. 9 "So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways but are showing partiality in the instruction. 10 "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?

The lawsuit brought against the people and the priests was twofold. First, the people brought imperfect sacrifices to the priests, and second, the priests went along with this ungodly folly. Beginning in the first verse of chapter 2, God addressed the priests and promised them a curse unless they "take heart to give honor to My name" (v. 1). Verses 3 -7, which were omitted from the reading, continued the theme of God's curse upon the priests. These intervening verses also

included a reminder about God's original call to Levi who had himself walked with God in purity, provided true instruction, and "turned many from iniquity" (Ezra 2:6). When we pick up again in verse 8 the indictment continues against the corrupted priesthood. God says they "have corrupted the covenant of Levi" after which God "despised and abased [them] before the people" (v. 9). In closing, God reminded them of their fatherhood of God the Father who created them and the fact that they had profaned their covenant with Him (v. 10).

The big idea in the reading is the moral decline of the spiritual leadership of the Nation which caused the violation of their covenant with God who created them (v. 10). In light of the whole biblical context, the human priesthood founded upon Levi was always beset by sin because of the weakness inherent in every human being (except Jesus). We see this in the Book of Hebrews where it says about these priests, "he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness" (Hebrews 5:2). The Old Testament priests, even with all their failings and sin, pointed the way towards the coming Perfect, High Priest Jesus. God called the people under the authority of those priests to look beyond their earthly ministry and rather towards Jesus, the "author and finisher of their faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

As we reflect upon the declining morality and evil among the priests in today's Old Testament reading, we aren't ignoring the sinful behavior of the priests. Rather, we are to understand that the prophets predicted this spiritual decline of the Israelites and that it would culminate with the murder of the Greatest Prophet of them all, Jesus (Isaiah 53:8-9). In our day, we must recognize the prophecy that the world will grow worse and worse with evil men and seducers misleading many until the return of the Lord Jesus (2 Timothy 3:13).

In contrast to the imperfect priesthood of the Old Testament, God has provided us with a Great High Priest, Jesus the Son of God (Hebrews 4:14). Jesus is the last and only priest in the line of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:15-16), something totally unique because it was in the line of Judah, not Levi. Jesus, the "antitype" of Melchizedek the King of Jerusalem from way back during the time of Abraham, is the final, one and only High Priest Who is also a King. Jesus, called the Son of David some seventeen times in the New Testament, fulfills the prophecy made by Malachi just a few verses past the ending of today's reading. "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context second reading from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians was his explanation to the church there about how the Gospel came to them. Early on in this chapter, he reminded them about how the good news came amongst severe opposition, and how he came with gentleness of speech (vv. 5-7). He also affirmed how he was "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (v. 4a).

We include verses 10 – 12 from the text which were omitted from the lectionary.

Second Reading:

1 Thessalonians 2:7-13 NAS95 7 But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. 8 Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. 9 For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; 11 just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, 12 so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

Paul explained to the Thessalonians how he gently cared for his flock gently, like a "nursing mother" (v. 7b) while working to support himself such as not to be a burden to them (v. 9b). Paul led the church by setting the example of godly behavior while encouraging others to do the same (vv. 10 -11). Finally, Paul commends the believers for receiving his message not just as his words, but as the word given from God (v. 13).

Paul recognized that his message of the Gospel, the good news, was divinely given to him not as the words of men, like the philosophers of the day, but rather as the Word of God. Saint Peter later affirmed this fact when he said, "just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16b-17, emphasis added). Paul recognized that the power of his ministry and the empowerment of the believers came not from man but from God Himself.

God calls us as believers to look beyond the human sources of His message and instead towards God Himself. As fellow ministers of the Gospel, we are to follow Paul's example of pointing people to focus not upon ourselves, but rather upon God's message sent through us. We are to walk humbly before God and not be burdensome to those whom we may be discipling as well as to be very careful in our behavior since we represent the image of Christ until His return. This is an important point to remember, especially in terms when we find ourselves relying perhaps too heavily upon the personality of a spiritual leader therefore we at least partially forsake the source of their message. This is true even when the message the leader brings to us is completely true. However, the same caution applies even more profoundly when the spiritual leader upon whom we are relying presents a message contradictory to the clear teaching of Scripture. This is what we will explore in next in the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Just before today's reading the Pharisees had heard that Jesus had "silenced the Sadducees" (Matt 22:34), who were the ruling body of the Jews referred to throughout the Bible as the "scribes." This provoked the Pharisees to further attack Jesus for His teachings throughout the balance of chapter 22. Jesus then silenced the Pharisees, at least for a time. Matthew said, "And no one was able to answer Him a word" (Matt 22:46a). Jesus' argument with them was regarding the Sonship of the Messiah, ultimately the divinity of the "Son of David" (Matt 22:42b). Jesus quoted from Psalm 110 in order to show the Pharisees that the "Christ," or Messiah, was both the Lord God and the Son of David, therefore the Son of God. This was a profound statement of Jesus' divinity because Jesus' nemesis, the Pharisees knew that the people recognized Him as the Christ. Matthew recorded this earlier when, "the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'" (Matt 21:15). Although many of the common people understood that Jesus was the Messiah, the scribes and the Pharisees most certainly did not. Further, all of these spiritual leaders, misunderstood the nature of the promised Messiah of God, expecting more a civil leader Who would overthrow the rulership of the Romans.

Jesus' had earlier responded to the Jews' question regarding whether He was the Messiah. We see in John's Gospel where they asked Him, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (John 10:24c). Jesus responded by telling them, "I told you, and you do not believe" (John 10:25a). Jesus explained His divinity to them further, saying "I and the Father are one" "John 10:30). This created a further division between the believers whom Jesus calls His sheep (John 10:3), and the unbelievers, the thieves or robbers (John 10:8). This division between the sheep and the goats (the nonbelievers) is a continuing theme throughout the Gospels, especially in John, for example in John 6:66, where most of Jesus' disciples walked away from Him.

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Gospel Reading:

Matthew 23:1-12 NAS95 1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, 2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. 4 They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5 But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. 8 But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

Jesus opened the reading by lumping together the ruling body of the Sadducees (the scribes) and the legalistic lay people (the Pharisees) into a single ruling body who held sway over the spiritual beliefs of the people (vv. 2-3). He told the crowds how the religious authorities positioned themselves in the seat of spiritual power (v. 2), while living lives of hypocrisy (v. 4). These leaders did things to be noticed (vv. 5 – 8) while coveting titles such as "Rabbi," "Father," and leader (vv. 7 – 10). Jesus taught the people that they were not to assign honor to these ungodly spiritual leaders who coveted these titles. Rather, they were to reserve such honor only to 1. The Father in Heaven (v. 8), 2. The One Leader Jesus Christ (v. 10), and 3. By implication the Holy Spirit as Teacher (v. 8b). Finally, Jesus affirmed the true problem of the false religious leaders, their pride (v. 12).

What does Jesus message mean to us today, are we not to call anyone father, leader, or teacher? Many of us have had, or have had spiritual fathers. Any of us who have been blessed to know their early father most certainly call him father. We see in the Scriptures that Saint Paul called himself both "father" (1 Corinthians 4:15, Philippians 2:22), and teacher (1 Timothy 2:7, 2 Timothy 1:11). And whom among us has never called their teacher, teacher? No, Jesus is telling us something else.

In light of the biblical context, and including all of the readings that we have considered today, what Jesus is teaching is an admonition against given anyone in a position of spiritual leadership **inappropriate** honor. Spiritual leaders most certainly play an important role in our lives, as do our human fathers and teachers. However, in today's reading Jesus calls us to look behind the humanity of those people, and towards the message of God and taught to us through the power of the Holy

Spirit.

In Jesus' day, the scribes and Pharisees were held by the people as the unquestionable religious authorities, not as we see them as the hypocrites described by Jesus with the benefit of 2,000 years of hindsight. Had the Jews in biblical times not obeyed these teachers they would have been subject to great scorn, discipline, and possibly even expulsion from the Jewish community. Such can be the case for us today should we reject the teachings of any spiritual leader who contradicts the clear teachings of Scripture. The Pharisees clearly did contradict Scripture, as Jesus earlier had told them that they were of their father the devil (John 8:44). In our day, God calls us to use spiritual discernment, to "test all things and hold fast that which is true" (1 Thess 5:21).

As believers in the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross Who bore the penalty for our sins, we can trust that Jesus has perfectly completed the work begun by the imperfect priests we read about in the first reading. These human priests, beset by sins as all humans are (Romans 3:23), pointed the way to the perfect, sinless King Priest. The priests' repeated sacrifices never took away the people's sins, it was just a covering until Jesus came. We see this in the Book of Hebrews:

Hebrews 10:1-4 NAS95 1 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The priestly system under the Law pointed the way towards the one single, bloody sacrifice of Jesus who willingly presented Himself on the cross in order to bear our sins. Jesus willingly gave His life and poured out His blood for us, because "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin" (Hebrews 9:22). As Christians, we remember Jesus' sacrifice for us each time we take communion, until the time when Jesus returns.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw the corruption of the Levitical Priesthood. In verse 10 the text reads,

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"Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?" What does the fatherhood of God for believers have to do with the condemnation that preceded this? What are some ways in which answering this question addressed specifically to the priests speaks to your own life?

2. Considering the difficulties of the human spiritual teachers we saw today, list three ways in which you can find comfort in the perfect, High Priest Jesus who completed the sacrificial system once and for all through the perfect sacrifice of His own body for us.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-06-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will learn about the final world empire in the first reading from the Prophet Daniel. Then we will learn about suffering from Saint Peter and the importance of listening to God from the Gospel of Matthew.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading from the Prophet Daniel follows the incident in Chapter 6 when Daniel was thrown into the lion's den but safely delivered through the divine providence of God. Chapter 7 opens with Daniel's visions of four beasts representing successive world rulers. If one studies world history, the identity of the first three is readily apparent, with the fourth, future empire shrouded in mystery. These begin with the Babylonian Empire represented by a lion (Daniel 7:4). Next, the Medo/Persian Empire is represented by a bear (Daniel 7:5). The third empire is that of the Greeks and is represented by a leopard (Daniel 7:6). Finally, the fourth future empire is represented by a terrifying beast with ten horns, but existing alongside another "little horn" which came about after the demise of three of the ten horns (or kingdoms / rulers). This future eschatological empire was at least partially fulfilled by the historical Roman Empire with its ruling city of Rome, the city on seven hills. It is apparent from studies of the biblical Books relating to the end times (the study of eschatology) that this last "Roman" empire will be much different from the one that preceded it. This final empire is the one displayed in the Book of Revelation. In a similar way that God exists as a Trinity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, this last world empire is represented by three leaders: The Beast, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet. The beast represents Satan, the filthy, unholy father of them all. The Antichrist is the world leader that will emerge in the end times falsely claiming to be the Messiah, and the Jews along with the whole world will be deceived. The third figure that will emerge at the conclusion of the present world is a figure known as the False Prophet. This person will function as a false "holy spirit" and will work to deceive and unite the world against God and His believers (Christians and Jews).

Today's reading picks up in Chapter 7 at verse 9 following God's revelation of the four world empires represented by their rulers, each called "beasts." The focus of the reading is upon the events surrounding the judgment of the last empire, the fourth kingdom that is "different from all the kingdoms" (Daniel 7:23). The ruler of this final kingdom will "change the times (Daniel 7:25), perhaps to some arrangement consisting of a six day week (the Beast cannot have a Sunday rest day), sixty days in a month, and six months in a year (6-60-6) in such a way as to display the pattern of sixes spoken of in Revelation (Revelation 13:18).

As you read, the identity of God the Father will come into view (v. 9, the Ancient of Days) along with the Son (v. 13, "one like a son of man."

First Reading: (Including Skipped Verses 11-12)

Daniel 7:9-14 NAS95 9 "I kept looking Until thrones were set up, And the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow And the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, Its wheels were a burning fire. 10 "A river of fire was flowing And coming out from before Him; Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; The court sat, And the books were opened. 11 "Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. 12 "As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time. 13 "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. 14 "And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed.

In the reading, Daniel relays God's message to people throughout the ages about a time when the True Ruler of the universe would judge the entire world including the "little horn," the future person of the AntiChrist. In the opening verse we see how the "Ancient of Days" sat down ("took His seat") to judge the world (v. 10). "The court sat, And the books were opened" for judgment.

The reading flows this way. Thrones were set up, notice the plural "thrones." Next, details were provided concerning the identity and characteristics of the Judge of the Universe, God the Father. The court proceedings were opened resulting in the slaying of the AntiChrist and deliverance to his eternal sentence in hell. This is the one spewing forth "boastful words" (v. 11) against God and His people. The reading closes with the return of the Lord Jesus, "One like a Son of Man" whose dominion "is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (v. 14).

The big idea and points of application of this reading are that the world in which we live will be judged and that the rightful Ruler, King Jesus, will reign forever. Evil rulers, whether existing in heaven or on earth, will be judged and sentenced to eternal punishment away from God and His people. We are people who have received advance warning from God not to be deceived by false rulers claiming to be God (Matthew 24:24). As believers with the hope in the promised return of the Lord Jesus, we can rest in the fact that God will satisfy our desire for evil to be judged and for the right to win. This will happen when Jesus is given dominion by the Ancient of Days. The Son of Man will establish the original purpose of humankind, "to serve Him." In this way, Jesus who is called the second Adam will accomplish what the first Adam lost in the Garden of Eden.

In our day, a time of God's grace, it seems that evil people "get away with it." But in today's reading we learn that although they may do so for a time, we can rest in the fact that God will even the score at the end of the age. All of the "beasts" will be judged, and we can be confident during our trials with the "beasts" in our lives that they will face judgment before the Ancient of Day unless they repent of their sins and trust in the One and Only solution, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for their sins. When we put our trust in the Son of Man, Jesus, we are putting our lives into the hands of the One who will reign in glory forever.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading from Saint Peter speaks to some of what we learned in the first reading regarding not being deceived while providing insights into the nature of Jesus, "One like a Son of Man" (Daniel 7:13). Peter wrote what is titled his second letter to Christians during a time of persecution under Nero. It was important for the early church to understand that they were not suffering for a made-up story, and that their suffering was not in vain. They were aligning themselves with the God-ordained Ruler of the earth, who was the verified and authentic Son of God. Though times were very difficult, Peter reassured them that they were on the right side.

Second Reading:

2 Peter 1:16-19 NAS95 16 For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased" — 18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19 So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

Peter's letter to suffering Christians came with an important message that would shore up their foundation of faith: Jesus is the real thing and He's worth it! Peter, who was a disciple (learner) of Jesus and, later, an apostle (meaning a "sent one") was a credible witness to the authenticity of the claims of Christ that had led these early believers to give up everything to follow Jesus. In the midst of persecution, it can be easy to question one's feelings and wonder if it's really worth it to suffer for someone you have never met. Peter's eyewitness account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, created a reliable source for them to rest assured that their faith was not based on a fairy tale. Peter

points to an important incident that happened while Jesus was on earth, the Transfiguration. This will be discussed further in the Gospel reading.

Peter uses a multi-sensory approach to convince the suffering saints that Jesus was authentically the Son of God. He not only saw Jesus' majesty revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration, he also heard the voice of God the Father (the Majestic Glory). The Father verified that Jesus was truly His Son and that the Son pleased the Father. This meant that even though Christ would suffer, which would make him look shameful in the eyes of humankind, He was actually honored for His obedience to the Father. No matter how things looked on the surface, Jesus' life was a success in the Father's eyes.

In the midst of suffering and persecution, one can imagine how this testimony would have been a huge source of comfort to those who had not been able to see the transfiguration nor heard this voice from heaven. They were admonished to stand strong in their faith and to focus their attention on the truth, rejecting the lies that the enemy was trying to sow into their hearts. Faith of this nature requires active engagement and vigilance on the part of the believer.

In our day, the message of this passage can bring comfort and encouragement for us to stand firm in our faith, knowing that Jesus is worthy of our worship and obedience. He is the real thing, authenticated by the very voice of God the Father, who made it known that Jesus was His Son. Jesus' life pleased the Father, which in turn, becomes the basis of our own righteousness. What was seen as a shameful death (death on a cross based on Galatians 3:13) actually was reversed by the Father's testimony of Jesus' righteousness. Jesus' ability to please the Father can now be applied to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21), setting us free from the penalty and shame of sin.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate actions. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v. 21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v. 222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v. 23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus

reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading:

1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John 18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence on the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry to the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centered around the Father's message to

Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the Father said, "**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!** (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

"Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to respond in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we should proceed. As I moved on to the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon, the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong, I was only trying to help? What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and to listen.

My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded to Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v. 5c). Peter, though well intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the love of the Father for Him (which by the way is the same love Jesus has for us based on John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own three-point plan.

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Reflection Questions

1. Jesus is highlighted in various ways in each of these three passages of Scripture. List out all of the descriptions and identify what these descriptions mean about who He is and who you are in Him. How can these truths shore up your own faith and help you to rest more solidly in times of difficulty?

2. In what ways are you challenged by the testimony of Peter and the story of Jesus' transfiguration? Are there ways that Peter's impulsivity to try to tell God what to do resonated with you? How does the reliability of Peter's testimony speak to the issues of your own faith journey?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-28-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Pentecost Sunday. We open with the first reading from Acts that chronicled the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in the early church. Then we move on to the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and discuss the gifts of the Spirit. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint John

where we will examine what it means when Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

The theme of the readings this week goes like this: In the first reading, we see God's sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the second reading, we see the revelation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we find the commissioning by the Holy Spirit for all believers to spread the Gospel message. Let's begin with the first reading from the Book of Acts. This is the record of the momentous day on which God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (John 14:17). This event occurred fifty days after Jesus had risen from the dead and ten days after Jesus returned to heaven.

First Reading

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. 5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs–we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (Acts 2:1-11)

God's sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18). The Holy Spirit is the Person who empowered the disciples to turn from hiding in the upper room to being bold speakers in the name of Jesus. Notice how the first ministry of the Holy Spirit was to cause the disciples to speak in various languages in such a way that the Jews from around the world heard them in their own language (v. 6). It's not known whether each of the disciples spoke a different foreign language or if they spoke some sort of

holy tongue that the foreigners were able to understand. Jesus had earlier told the disciples, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). This first ministry of the Spirit was to spread the Gospel to the foreign Jews gathered for Pentecost by allowing them to hear the Gospel message in their own language. Their testimony was that "we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God" (v. 11).

We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. His ministry through the believers in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. As we move to the second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we see some of the gifts sent to us by the Holy Spirit.

Second Reading

3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3-13)

In this reading, Paul cataloged some of the gifts of the Spirit and said that the purpose of the gifts was "for the common good" (v. 7). Although this was not an exhaustive list of the gifts (see also Ephesians 4:7-13 and Romans 12:3-8), they included wisdom and knowledge (v. 8), faith (v. 9a), healing (v. 9b), miracles (v. 10a), prophecy (v. 10b), discernment of spirits (v. 10c), speaking in tongues (v. 10d), and interpretation of those speaking in tongues (v. 10e). Later in the reading, Paul stated that although the gifts of the Spirit were diverse with everyone having a different gift, they were delivered by God in such a way as to work perfectly together in the whole body of the church

(vv. 11-13). Even though not everyone would have the same gift, the diversity of gifts among the believers would accomplish God's purposes through the unity of the believers (v. 13). For example, only certain people were given the gift of prophecy, meaning either the ability to foretell future events or more prominently in the New Testament context to forth tell through the preaching of the Scriptures. In today's age, some of the gifts that Paul listed are more prevalent than other ones. During the early church immediately after God sent the Holy Spirit certain gifts such as tongues and healing were very important as "sign gifts" that greatly increased the spread of the Gospel to a culture thoroughly immersed in the worship of idols. God used these sign gifts in a powerful way as we can see in the first reading with the empowerment of the disciples to speak in various languages.

As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God the Holy Spirit commission the believers in the early church to spread the Gospel. The context of the reading from John Chapter 20 is the evening of the first Easter Sunday when Jesus' first appeared to the disciples who were gathered together in the upper room with the doors locked. This didn't stop Jesus, who was able to walk right through the wall or door by exercising His divine power with His new glorified body. Only ten of the disciples were present as Thomas "The Twin" didn't see Jesus until the next time the whole group was gathered together (John 20:26), and Judas had already given up hope and killed himself.

Before we read the text, since the central focus of the lesson will be on the concept of the forgiveness of sin let's review what God's Holy Word says about this crucially important subject. First, God says that everyone, except for Jesus, is a sinner. Paul said in Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Second, God says that because of our sin, we deserve the penalty of death; having sinned against a Holy God Who is completely separate from sin. Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). We can never enter into the presence of our Holy God because we are sinful. The only way that we can enter into a relationship with God and be in His presence when we die is to have our sin forgiven by God. Third, there is good news. Paul continued in Romans 6:23, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b-ff). Finally, only God can forgive sin. In Luke's Gospel Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees after he proclaimed the forgiveness of a paralyzed man's sin, and they challenged Jesus authority to forgive sin. In response Jesus said, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, –He said to the paralytic—'I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home'" (Luke 5:23-24). Though Scripture tells us to "confess our sins one to another" (James 5:16), only God can forgive sin. Jesus came to the earth as God in the flesh for the express purpose of dying on the cross for our sin (Romans 4:25). "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Paul explained later in Romans Chapter 10 how to receive the free gift of eternal life through the

forgiveness of our sin:

that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED." Romans 10:9-13

We see that the forgiveness of our sin is the free gift of God that comes by believing the good news of the Gospel. Jesus gave the disciples, and by application every Christian, what is called the Great Commission to preach this message about the forgiveness of sin. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). This is the Gospel, meaning good news, that Jesus instructed his believers to preach to the world for the forgiveness of sin.

Now, with these things in mind let's read what happened that Sunday evening when Jesus made a surprise visit to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

Gospel Reading

19 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." (John 20:19-23)

What did Jesus mean when he said in verse 23, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained"? The key to understanding Jesus' teaching in verse 23 is found in the previous two verses. Jesus said, "as the Father has sent

Me, I also send you" (v. 21b). Next, in verse 22 He promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. This "sending" or "commissioning" of the disciples (and all believers) is one of the main purposes of the church as expounded in the Great Commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus instructed these ten men that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved, just as we saw in Romans Chapter 10. The interpretation of Scripture must always be consistent with the whole counsel of God's Word.

What do the three themes we discovered in the readings today mean in our lives? First, God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His believers in order to accomplish His purposes. He sent a diversity of gifts to a diversity of people in such a way that it forces the Church to work together as the Body of Christ. Second, God commissioned all believers, not just the ten disciples that were gathered in the room at Pentecost, to fulfil His Great Commission. This means that everyone that believes is to work to spread the Gospel message and to disciple believers, recognizing that not everyone will be gifted in either of these two particular areas. Some will be called to teach, and some to evangelize. You can rest assured that if you truly commit your heart to the Lord that you won't automatically be called by Him as a missionary in Africa. But you can be assured that God will call you to use whatever spiritual gift(s) that He has given you to your fullest ability.

Earlier this week I was driving home from the local lake after spending three hours windsurfing, which is one of my favorite pastimes. As I turned the corner on the road leading up to our house at around 7:00 pm, I recognized my neighbor as he drove by me on the way back to work at our local Christian college. Although he goes into work at 8:00 in the morning with his wife and returns with her sometime after 5:00 pm, he usually returns after dinner. Although God has gifted this man in a variety of ways, through it all is one of his preeminent qualities: faithfulness. This really inspired me to be faithful as well. Although God doesn't call everyone to work 10 plus hours each day on a fixed salary as my neighbor does, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The full list of spiritual gifts can be found in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11. We looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today. Read

each of the other passages and see if you can locate the full list of spiritual gifts: Administration, Knowledge, Apostleship, Leadership, Discernment, Mercy, Evangelism, Miracles, Exhortation, Pastor/Shepherd, Faith, Prophecy, Giving, Serving/Ministering, Healing, Teaching, Interpretation of Tongues, Tongues, Wisdom

Romans 12:6-8 NAS95 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:28-30 NAS95 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

Ephesians 4:11 NAS95 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

2. What is your spiritual gift? One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other believers. Another way it to use one of the variety of spiritual gift tests available online. See for example:

http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1

In what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-21-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts just after Jesus was taken up into heaven. Then we move to the continuing study on First Peter, and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 7, which is Jesus' prayer for Christian unity.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is forty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus had gathered the disciples together and they had just asked Him the question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6c). This was an honest question and indicated what was evident on all of their minds. Would Jesus now usher in His reign on earth as both a religious King *and* supreme civil ruler as foretold in the Scriptures? They would have been familiar with what the Prophet Micah had predicted regarding His future rulership. "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). Jesus answered their question with something that they probably did not want to hear. He said, "It is

not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). However, Jesus went on, "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Afterwards, Jesus was taken up into heaven leaving the disciples waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

With this context in mind, read the text and keep in your mind the flurry of events that the disciples had just experienced, including seeing a fully alive Man ascend into heaven followed by the appearance of two angels (Acts 1:10).

First Reading:

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)

Several points can be drawn from the reading and especially ones that relate to the Gospel lesson later in this study. First, the disciples of the early church were united in continual prayer. The Scriptures call all believers to pray with the example set by Jesus' first believers. Prayer is one of the ways in which the church is united in their purpose. Some years ago in seminary I took a course in prayer. I wondered how anyone could study prayer for an entire semester. One of the things that I was concerned about before I began the course was that the syllabus said that I had to locate a prayer partner and agree to pray with them for one hour each week throughout the term. Soon after the class began I was able to locate a suitable classmate with whom to each week. As the semester progressed I noticed for the first time in my life the value of joining in prayer with another Christian. Although I am certain that I didn't pray with the same fervor as did Saint Peter, I did obtain strength through persisting in meeting with my prayer partner which has led me to much stronger prayer life since the conclusion of the class.

Second, the unity of the church included women, who were people with very low status in the culture, not much more than property. Women were the first ones to testify of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, even though in this culture the testimony of women in civil court was often

disregarded. Jesus turned society morays on its proverbial ear, he turned the world upside down by valuing women equally with men and even affording them a position of prominence by seeing to it that they were the first witnesses of the resurrection!

Third, note that John said "These all with one mind" (v. 14a). When all of the believers in a group have the same mind, they are united not only in their purpose but also work to align their will with the revealed will of God through the mutual understanding of His Word in the Scriptures. One of the practices that I did with my own prayer partner was that when we ran out of things to say we just read the Bible aloud. Having just experienced Jesus' last 40 days of ministry and also being fresh from the Emmaus Road experience the disciples must have studied the Old Testament Scriptures (as we call them) with a renewed fervor and understanding. This unity of thinking and mission would help the early church to persevere during the subsequent persecution that early on descended upon the Church.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading and continue with the teaching in First Peter, keep the theme of unity of all believers in your mind. In this message, Saint Peter taught the early church the importance of rejoicing in spite of persecution, as well as what actions to take during these difficulties.

Second Reading:

13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (1 Peter 4:13-16)

Peter said that if you "are reviled for the name of Christ" (v. 14a) you are blessed. How can someone be blessed if they are persecuted for Christ? Peter said we are blessed during persecution because "the Spirit of glory rests on you" (v.14c-ff). Jesus promised that He would not leave us as orphans (John 14:18), that His Spirit would rest upon the believers. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is

to help believers to persist in persecution for their faith. Peter called us to "glorify God in this name" and not to be ashamed because of persecution (v. 16). He contrasted this with someone who suffered for breaking a civil law, or even just being a "troublesome meddler," thing which the Spirit will not comfort us and for which we should expect persecution.

One of the common themes that frequently emerge from the testimony of Christians who experienced long periods of persecution for their faith is the comfort of the Holy Spirit that they found through the unity with other believers. We will see the importance of unity as revealed in Jesus' prayer to the Father as we move to the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson for today has to do with Jesus' call for unity in the Church. John opened the Gospel lesson today by saying, "Jesus spoke these things," and then he prayed to the Father. What were "these things" to which John was referring? If we look back to the previous two verses, we see what John was referring to. Jesus said, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be **scattered**, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:32-33, emphasis added). Jesus knew that the disciples, with the exception of John, would scatter during his tribulation and death on the cross. He also knew that they would scatter because of the persecution that would come upon the young church after he went back to heaven.

Gospel Reading:

1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. 6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; 8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. 9 "I ask on their behalf;

I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; 10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. (John 17:1-11)

Notice how Jesus made a variety of affirmation while He was praying, and then proceeded to present to the Father his petitions. Jesus affirmed that He had authority over the entire world, "all flesh" (v. 1) and that the Father had given the believers eternal life for the purpose of knowing the "one true God and Jesus Christ" (v. 2). He affirmed that He had manifested the Name of the Father to the believers whom the Father had given to Him (v. 6), Next, Jesus prayed that the believers would become "one even as We are one" (v. 11). Jesus call to unity with Himself represented the core of the Gospel message, that believers become one with God through faith in Jesus Christ and the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

What does all of this mean for our lives? First, Jesus' call for us to be united with Himself and the Father comes about through the things we have seen in the lesson today. We are to be united by gathering together in prayer, by praying continually, even when we are by ourselves. We are called to submit ourselves to the will of the Father, and to learn His will by understanding His revelation through the Scriptures. Second, we can find unity with God by accepting persecution for our faith with the understanding that this glorifies God. When we are led by God to take up countercultural positions on certain moral issues including affirming the rights of all unborn children we can have courage that God will glorify His name through our obedience.

Reflection Questions

1. Throughout the lesson today we have seen how the disciples were unified in their mind to accomplish Jesus' mission for them. One of the ways in which they both expressed and achieved this unity was through their constant prayer with the group.

I challenge you this week to pray with another believer at least once during the upcoming week. Even if it is before a meal or over the telephone, ask the person if they would be willing to pray together. Be prepared to answer the most common objections such as not having enough time, my faith is a personal thing, this makes me uncomfortable, etc.

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2. A few years ago I spent two weeks in France with a group of college students. The cultural differences took me some getting used to. I rejoiced at the fact that those in France still had a certain reverence for the people of God although they regarded people who claimed to be Christians with a bit of suspicion.

In light of your cultural experiences, how does your faith in Jesus Christ help you in overcoming the cultural differences that you experience in your own life and work? How does what you learned today help to inform you of some of the ways in which to attack these cultural challenges?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-02-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Palm Sunday. This week we open with the first reading, which is the procession of the palms. Then we move to the Old Testament reading that gives us a glimpse of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah. The New Testament reading shows the humility of Jesus, who came to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah having to suffer. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel account of Jesus' passion, our Messiah, Who paid the penalty for our sin.

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Procession of the Palms:

The Gospel reading of the procession of the palms is from Matthew 21. This is Saint Matthew's telling of the preparation and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As you read, imagine that you were a believing Jew among the crowd and spread your own palm branches on the road for the King.

1 When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5 "SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, 'BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.'" 6 The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, 7 and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. 8 Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. 9 The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" 10 When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" 11 And the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11)

The time around Passover was a season of messianic expectancy, and there were many pilgrims in the city for the celebration. Certainly, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead that we read last week would have played into His sudden popularity and for the people's desire to see Him. In messianic form, Jesus directed His disciples with exact precision, and when they followed His orders, everything worked out exactly as Jesus had said. Jesus asserted His authority over Jerusalem by riding into the city on a donkey, not a mighty stallion as would have been done by kings. Notice how precisely Jesus fulfilled the Prophet Zechariah's prophecy, that called for both a donkey and the colt of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Evidently, according to Saint Matthew's narrative, Jesus rode on the colt and the donkey (its mother) walked alongside.

The procession of the palms dealt with Jesus' first coming. As we look forward to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday, let's study Jesus' second coming. The Book of Revelation revealed some of the details about Jesus' physical return to the earth at the end of the Great Tribulation period. Jesus entered Jerusalem during His First Advent on a donkey. Read what the Scripture says about how He will return the second time.

11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. 12 His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. 13 He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. 15 From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. 16 And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." (Revelation 19:11-16).

Jesus came the first time as a humble, unblemished Lamb (Revelation 13:8). However, Jesus will return the second time as the glorious Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). He will return as the Almighty Warrior on a white horse, not a donkey as happened the first time. At His First Coming, many people missed His appearance. According to John, at His Second Coming He will not be missed. John said, "BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen" (Rev 1:7). When the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (v. 16b) returns, He will come in judgment to a people living "as in the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37) expecting things to continue as they always had in the past. Since God has given us this warning, we must ask ourselves "How now shall we live?" While ignorance seems to be bliss, it does not lead to eternal life.

This Sunday as we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entrance in Jerusalem at His First Advent, we can celebrate that we are among those that did, in a sense, welcome Jesus to Jerusalem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We can celebrate that we are not among those who missed His first coming. As we hold our palms, we can proudly celebrate our belief that King Jesus will one day return to the earth he created. In our waving of the palms, we can lift them up as white flags of surrender to the King who deserves our whole lives.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Old Testament reading at the Mass is from Isaiah 50. We see that God judged Israel's sinfulness, but then also provided a way for salvation in this prediction of the Messiah. *Note: Surrounding verses were included for the context.*

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD, "Where is the certificate of divorce By which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, And for your transgressions your mother was sent away. 2 Why was there no man when I came? When I called, why was there none to answer? Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, I dry up the sea with My rebuke, I make the rivers a wilderness; Their fish stink for lack of water And die of thirst. 3 I clothe the heavens with blackness And make sackcloth their covering." 4 The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them. 10 Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. 11 Behold, all you who kindle a fire, Who encircle yourselves with firebrands, Walk in the light of your fire And among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: you will lie down in torment. (Isaiah 50:1-11)

The first section talks about God's discipline on the northern tribes of Israel (verses1-3). The picture that these verses paint is one of temporarily setting aside this group of God's chosen people until they come to believe in God's sending of the Messiah. The prophecy shifts to the personalization of the Messiah's suffering, which is known as Good Friday (verses 4-9). The proper response is seen in verse 10: "Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? **Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God**." This is the crux of the matter that all people will have to resolve. In what or in whom do we trust? Our own fires that we ourselves kindle or the fire that God sets in our heart to believe in Jesus the Messiah?

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will read about the fulfillment of the suffering of God's servant (Is. 50:6 "scourged" and "spat upon") in great detail. The predicted suffering from Isaiah is also the backdrop for the New Testament reading, which was probably sung as a hymn in the early Church about the great lengths that Jesus went to in order to fulfill the Father's plan for our salvation.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2:6-11 where we learn about how Jesus came the first time as a humble Servant.

Second Reading:

6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

This passage continues the sharp contrast that the Bible portrays between Jesus' first Advent and His second coming. The first advent He came as a humble servant. In this act of the incarnation and His death, He not only served His Father, but he served us. Humankind was in desperate need of a Savior, owing a sin debt beyond the ability to repay. So He became the suffering Servant "for the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2), paying our debt on the cross. By being obedient to the Father, He will come again in exaltation and power (as we saw in Revelation earlier). The second coming will be very different from the first Advent. In addition to every eye seeing his second coming, this passage informs us that every knee will bow, voluntarily or involuntarily. The choice is ours to make. We can voluntarily bow our knee to the Messiah now, or we can harden our hearts against Him, only to involuntarily bow when He returns.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel Reading is Matthew's account of the passion, which includes the betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, humiliation, crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

14 Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What are

you willing to give me to betray Him to you?" And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him. 16 From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus. 17 Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" 18 And He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is near; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples."'" 19 The disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. 20 Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. 21 As they were eating, He said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me." 22 Being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, "Surely not I, Lord?" 23 And He answered, "He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. 24 "The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." 25 And Judas, who was betraying Him, said, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself." 26 While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 27 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; 28 for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. 29 "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." 30 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.' 32 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." 33 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." 35 Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too. 36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. 38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." 39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." 40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? 41 "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." 43 Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. 45 Then He came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" 47 While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48 Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him." 49 Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. 50 And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus

and seized Him. 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. 53 "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 "How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?" 55 At that time Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. 56 "But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets." Then all the disciples left Him and fled. 57 Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. 58 But Peter was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. 59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death. 60 They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, 61 and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 The high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" 63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN." 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; 66 what do you think?" They answered, "He deserves death!" 67 Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, 68 and said, "Prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?" 69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." 70 But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." 71 When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." 73 A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away." 74 Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. 1 Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; 2 and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. 3 Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" 5 And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. 6 The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." 7 And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. 8 For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "AND THEY TOOK THE

THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET by the sons of Israel; 10 AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME." 11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." 12 And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" 14 And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed. 15 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. 16 At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. 17 So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" 18 For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." 20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. 21 But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" 23 And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!" 24 When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves." 25 And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" 26 Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified. 27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. 28 They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. 29 And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. 31 After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. 32 As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, 34 they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. 35 And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. 37 And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." 38 At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. 39 And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, 42 "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. 43 "HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE Him now, IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words. 45 Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a

loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" 47 And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. 49 But the rest of them said, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him." 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" 55 Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. 56 Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. 57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. 58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61 And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. 62 Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, 63 and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' 64 "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." 66 And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (Matthew 26:14 – 27:66)

Let us pray. Dear God, as we move forward to the Holy Week, please pray that many would hear the message of the good news of the Gospel. Please pray that their hearts would be opened for them to be able to receive the gift of Jesus' sacrifice He made for them. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. The week before Jesus' crucifixion, the people applauded Him as their Messiah. They probably thought that Jesus was going to overthrow the Romans and set up His earthly Kingdom. When He was arrested and tried, the people rejected the concept of a Suffering Servant (Is. 53). They had no idea the importance of His death as the payment for their sin. Instead, they wanted a Messiah who

would give them political deliverance. We need to learn from their mistake, and ponder whether we want the real Messiah that God sent (the One who acts for our spiritual deliverance) or do we want a Messiah of our own making (a powerful ruler who makes our circumstances more comfortable)? He will one day set the record straight and deliver us from physical oppressors, but now He is working on our hearts to deliver us from spiritual oppressors.

The question is, will we let Him do this good work in us, or will we reject Him, as the people did before Pilate, not recognizing His rightful place in our lives?

2. What is one thing from these readings that helps you to trust in how Jesus is working in your life?

3. All of the readings from this week portray a running contrast between Jesus' first coming and His second coming. His first Advent already came, but His second coming is yet to happen. How can bowing your knee to King Jesus now prepare you for the Second coming?

Katie's Testimony



I can't tell you exactly what it was, but something happened to me October 4, 2022, and it was

amazing. Scratch that, I do know what happened. It was the glorious grace of God. And the best part? The joy I received on that day hasn't gone away! I'm not sure if what I experienced was the revival of a doubting heart, or true salvation for the first time, but either way, I can now confidently say that I KNOW I'm saved. Not in an arrogant way, but with a confidence that Christ is faithful and will keep his promises. Let me tell you my story.

I have struggled with doubt most of my life. Since I first professed to be saved at age 15, I often questioned whether or not I truly belonged to Jesus. I was raised in a Christian home, went to church 3 times a week, went to all the special services, prayed before meals…all the things I thought Christians were "supposed" to do. I was quickly distracted by my high school social life, sports, and academics, then by college and all the distractions that come with it. I read my Bible on occasion, because I knew I probably should, and I would talk to God a little, but he usually felt far away. I always felt like something as "off". I called out to God on several occasions, asking him to change me, forgive me, save me or to do something, but it often ended with me feeling nothing. At those times I would conclude that I was either already saved or a lost cause. I would feel desperate for peace, but at times when I did feel some peace, it never lasted. So I would go on with life just focusing on the here and now, because I didn't know what else to do. I had no Christian friends to turn to, and during college I felt very alone, turning to whatever group of friends made me feel included, even if they weren't good influences on my life. I couldn't figure out what was missing. I believed in Jesus, I knew I was a sinner and I knew Jesus was the only way to Heaven, but something still wasn't quite right. When I heard other people talk about their walk with the Lord, it sounded like I was listening as an outsider. I knew I was supposed to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but it sure didn't feel personal. If someone were to ask me if I was going to heaven when I die, I would have said yes, but with a small, unsettling pang in my stomach that said "are you sure"?

After graduating college and marrying my husband, the doubts continued off and on. My husband probably got tired of explaining to me the promises of God, but he was patient and supportive when I needed it. After a pretty cold and bitter spiritual time, we joined our current church and, though I didn't have the peace I longed for, things started to improve. Jesus was exalted, and I started to learn more about what true Christianity is. I was inspired by the love for Jesus I saw and their zeal for sharing the gospel. I started to see more of the holiness of God, and how awesome Jesus is, but when other ladies talked about their Jesus in their lives, it felt like I was watching from the outside. I wanted that closeness with him, but as I mentioned earlier, I didn't know what was missing.

Sometime during the summer of 2022 I was having a mental and spiritual low. I had always wanted

to have a Bible study with my pastor's wife, but didn't want to bother her as I figured

she had more important things to do (which I know wasn't true). My husband knew I needed help so he reached out to our pastor's wife on my behalf and asked if she would have a Bible study with me and, of course, she was happy to. A short while later I started meeting with a friend on occasion to talk about life, the Lord, and read some scripture. I was introduced to a Biblical podcast and I was listening to it regularly. I started reading my Bible a bit more. I could feel the Lord working.

One day, which I later figured out to be October 4th, I was driving home from meeting with my friend, listening to a podcast about living free from condemnation and walking in the grace of God. Maybe 5 minutes in, someone posed the question "what do you tell someone who is struggling with their eternal security and can't let go of past sin?" to which one of them responded with a quote from R.C. Sproul: "I would say to go back to the Lord in prayer, but this time instead of asking him to forgive you for the sin that has been haunting you, ask him to forgive you for questioning his integrity and refusing to accept his forgiveness". It was at this moment that God stabbed me in the heart. That is exactly what I have been doing – calling God a liar. I believed, I knew I was sinner, I knew that Jesus is the only way, and I even repented, but did I FULLY TRUST that he was going to do what he said he would do? I concluded that I didn't. I would never have admitted it, but what I was really doing is trying to fix myself. Trying to be perfect. And when I committed those same sins I struggled with over and over again, I would doubt my salvation, assuming that there is no way I could be saved if I couldn't conquer these sins. So right there as I was driving, I took my hands off the wheel (yes, in hindsight I should have pulled over!) and reached upward and said "here, they are yours (referring to my sin)! I don't want them anymore! And I trust that you will take them from me and I trust you to keep me eternally" (or something to that effect). And wouldn't you know, my desperation turned to joy! My helplessness turned to peace! Now, I've had religious experiences in the past that were more like emotional highs that didn't last, so while I felt fantastic, I wanted to make sure that this wasn't just an emotional high. So went on with my normal life… but now I thought about Jesus all the time. I couldn't wait to find those rare alone times that I could read his Word. I wanted to proclaim how great he is to others. And 2.5 months later, I feel just a joyful and peaceful as I did on October 4th. Where the rubber meets the road for me is that it hasn't been a blissfully perfect 2.5 months. At times I've lost my temper with my kids. I've been cranky with my husband. I've been impatient. One day I even had a mental breakdown, which would normally spiral me into a pit of despair and doubt. But the difference this time? I called out to the Lord and fell into his parachute of grace. I repented, got right with him, and moved forward with peace. And I KNOW I am forgiven, because God is faithful!

Psalm 40:1-3 – I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heart my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and

established my goings. And he had put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord.

Psalm 130:7 – …for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption (I love this phrase!)

Bio:

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-19-2023



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Notes. This week we read from the Book of Leviticus, continue our study in First Corinthians and finally conclude with further study from the Sermon on the Mount from Saint Matthew. There we will see a message that Jesus gave his disciples, which culminated with a statement to them that they were to be perfect. How can anyone be perfect, you may ask? We will address that and other things in the Mass Notes this week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

In the first reading this week, it's important for us to put our Old Testament hats back on and return to the culture of ancient Judaism. The first reading this week is from Leviticus Chapter 19. The Book of Leviticus is concerned with God's giving of the Law to Moses, and especially the ecclesiastical Law concerning sacrifices, offerings, and dietary Law. One of the overall purposes of the Law was to set the Hebrew people apart from the surrounding people. God said in the previous chapter, "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'I am the LORD your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes'" (Leviticus 18:2-3). However, the most significant purpose of the Law was to point people to the perfect sacrifice that would occur through the Lamb of God (Jesus) who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Let's pick up with the reading today in Chapter 19.

First Reading:

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. 17 You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.'" (Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18)

Several points arise from the reading. First, we see that God called the Hebrew Nation to be holy or set apart from sin and dedicated to the service of the LORD. Although we have all used and heard the word "holy" lots of times in our lives, it's easy to gloss over the rich meaning of the word. In the reading, God provided a simple reason why the Jews were to be holy when He said, "You shall be

holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (v. 2b). This was God's appeal to His nature and a calling for the Hebrew nation to emulate his character. As we said above, one reason that God provided the Law was to set apart the Nation of Israel from the surrounding people. The word holy means to be set apart and the Jews were called to be a peculiar people, different from the idolaters in the pagan cultures that surrounded them. They were to be holy because they were God's chosen people and were to reflect His image of holiness to the world around them. As we saw two weeks ago in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, the concept of being "set apart" was to fulfil special purposes for God, not to live an ordinary existence. The Jews were set apart for the purpose to be salt and light to those around them.

Second, God set a high standard of love for one's neighbor. This standard would have been foreign to the people from the nations surrounding Israel. The Jews, and by application all believers including us, were not to hate our neighbor in their mind (v. 17a), but were instead called to love their neighbors as themselves (v. 18c), and were not to take vengeance against them (v. 18a). He didn't mean that we had to just love our literal neighbors, but everyone. God set this high standard of loving behavior in stone, in the Law of the land for the Hebrew people. Which of us hasn't hated our neighbor at one time or another?

Third, God said that the Jews were not to take vengeance against their neighbors. This wasn't directed to soldiers in battle because God provided clear direction to the Jews regarding those matters (see for example Deuteronomy 2:34, 3:6, and especially Deuteronomy 20:16-18). This was directed to all of God's people who were given these specific examples of how to live out one's life in a status as "set apart." Saint Paul confirmed that the admonition against taking retribution in Romans and quoted the exact verse from Leviticus. "'Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Although we may feel like we want to get even with someone for hurting us, God has given us a universal calling not to act against a "neighbor" that has wronged us.

Back when I lived in a suburb in a large Midwestern city, I developed a strong dislike for the neighbor whose back yard adjoined the back of my own house. This neighbor had a dog that they used to let outside to do his business. This dog would then bark endlessly until the neighbor let him back inside. Their barking dog used to drive me crazy. As a result, I developed a strong dislike them, and I didn't even know them. One day out of the blue, I came up with a novel approach to solve the problem. The next time he let the dog out to bark (I mean to let him do his business!) I walked over to the fence and called to the dog, "here boy." I kept calling and sure enough, the dog came running over to the fence, jumped up wanted to be petted. I made friends with the dog that day and as a result found that I no longer disliked my neighbor either! In fact, after I moved away, I actually missed my doggy friend. Why did it take me so many years to figure that out? This was a

case where love did truly conquer the conflict with my neighbor. Now if I could just make friends with my current neighbor's dog!

How about you? Do you have some difficult people in your life to whom God is calling you to love, even though you don't have feelings of love for them? If you are His child, He will give you the ability to grow in loving even your enemies. Pray to God and ask Him to change your heart.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading this week is a continuation of the study from last week in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In this reading, Saint Paul explains the concept of personal holiness. As you read, try to imagine the sense that a First Century Jew would have had when Paul mentioned the phrase "temple of God" and how that would flavor their reading of this text.

Second Reading:

16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. 18 Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; 20 and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." 21 So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, 23 and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Corinthians 3:16-23)

For a First Century Jew the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest and most sacred place on earth. We know from Jesus' ministry to the Jews that they had a difficult time understanding how the human body could be a temple (John 2:19). This was especially true not only because of the grandeur of the temple but also because the whole Jewish religious system revolved around the temple. But when Jesus ushered in the church age, He fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel. "And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). Our bodies are a holy temple, or shrine. Later in the same

Letter Paul said, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"(1 Corinthians 6:19). We are called to be holy because our bodies are a living temple of God.

In the next section, Paul prescribed humility for healing the divisions that existed in the Corinthian Church. What Paul is saying is that a person must be humble in order to learn. Paul quoted from Job Chapter 5 and Psalm 94 to make his point. Verse 10 that he quoted from Psalm 94 was sandwiched between two verses that dealt with chastening. "*10 He who **chastens** the nations, will He not rebuke, Even He who teaches man knowledge? 11 The LORD knows the thoughts of man, That they are a mere breath. 12 Blessed is the man whom You **chasten**, O LORD, And whom You teach out of Your law*" (Psalms 94:10-12). Chastening can be God's way to bring us to a humble position. One of Paul's intents was to bring the chastening of the Lord to bear on the sin of division in the Corinthian church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

I want to include a story that will help you to understand holiness in light of biblical teachings so that you can better understand Jesus' words in the Gospel reading. One night I was attending a dinner party at a friend's house in a nearby city. After dinner, we were sitting around talking and the doorbell rang. My friend left to answer the door and then suddenly called out, "Jim, it's for you!" Thoughts raced through my mind, who even knew that I was there, who could it be that wanted me while I was visiting someone else's house? I left the dining room and walked over to the front door only to be met by two young Mormon missionaries. These were of course not unique and matched the "cookie cutter" pattern with their nametags and backpacks. This was going to be an interesting night! After I introduced myself to the men, I prayed silently and asked God for the approach that I should take in order to introduce these boys to the *true* Gospel. As it turned out I had just completed a study of Mormon doctrine and it came to me that I should discuss the doctrine of perfection with them. I just so happened to have a Bible with me in my jacket and I asked them if they were familiar with Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. I don't remember their answer, but I pulled out my Bible and asked them if they had time for a little Bible study because "You do believe in the Bible, don't you?" Next, I asked them, "How good do you have to be to make it to heaven?"

They said something like, "We strive to be perfect." They were very nice boys, just a bit misguided.

I said that that was good because "Did you know that under the biblical Law Jesus taught that in

order to be saved by being a good person you have to be perfect?" I opened the Bible to Matthew Chapter 5 and read, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). I asked them what was their standard of perfection, just how good did they have to be to make it to heaven, and how would they know when they had reached this standard? They weren't sure about that but said that they just had to keep on trying. The debate continued and I was able to show them God's true plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and not by good works. I explained to them how God emphasized the value of our good works, but that good works were not meritorious for salvation. I read to them Saint Paul's capstone statement on the matter:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Paul's statement about the only way that people are saved (v. 8a) is quite different from what is taught by the Mormon "church" that believes that they are saved by grace, but only *after all they can do*. This addendum is noticeably missing from the Word of God. Since salvation is a free gift from God that is obtained *only* through faith in the Lord Jesus, we don't have to strive to be perfect in order to earn our salvation. Paul explained that the reason that God saved us was for the purpose of our good works. He didn't say that we were saved because of our good works. Although Christians are called to live holy lives through God's power, a good Mormon is expected to triumph over sin in their own power, and this in order to earn their salvation. We can rejoice in the victory that God has given us over such a false belief system.

With these things in mind, let's read the Gospel text.

Gospel Reading:

You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' 39 But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. 41 Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. 43 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His

sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)

The opening quotation was from Exodus 21:24. As an interesting side note, this quotation in Exodus followed the warning from God about neglecting to honor your parents. The Jewish Law said, "He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 21:17). Even though Jesus came to fulfill the Jewish Law, and under the New Covenant the civil and ceremonial Law is no longer binding upon Christians, the principles found in the *moral* Law are behaviors which are upheld in the New Testament. This includes honoring our parents (Ephesians 6:2), though the penalty for disobeying this law is no longer the death penalty. Notice the word "but," a transitory (conjunction) term. Jesus said, in effect, "The Law prescribed this (you have heard it said), *but* I say do that." Jesus wasn't contradicting the Law but was instead calling His followers to obey a standard *higher* than the Law. We will see that this calling wasn't limited just to the Jewish Law, but to the laws of their entire society.

Jesus also called His followers to recognize a higher standard than their religious Law found in the Pentateuch (the first five Books of the Bible). His called extended to the Roman Civil law as well. This fact came out in verse 41 when Jesus spoke about being forced to go one mile. The First Century Jews were living under Roman occupation and as a result were under certain laws falling under the category of "impressment." Although they weren't under a requirement by the Romans to serve in a military function (conscription) they were required in certain circumstances to assist the Roman military. This could include being required to carry a Roman soldier's backpack 1,000 paces (a Roman mile). Jesus' outrageous call was to show the Roman soldier's generosity by going beyond the legal requirement. This principle of "going beyond the law" runs throughout today's Gospel reading.

Next, Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19, the text that we studied in the first reading. He said that you should love your neighbor (v. 43) but go beyond this and love your enemies and those who persecute you (v. 44). Jesus' mention of "enemies and those who persecute you" could be an allusion to the Romans and the impressment laws. The Romans were the enemies of the Jews, which was a condition that came to a head with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, then again in AD 132.

Who are the "Romans" in your life? How might you go beyond obligation and actually go the extra mile?

The culmination of Jesus' radical call to go beyond the requirements of the law to perfection was found in verse 48. Take careful note of the adverb "therefore," and ask yourself "what is it there for?" This word is "there for" because it linked Jesus call to a radical new behavior to the source of the empowerment for His people to achieve it. Jesus said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). I asked the Mormon missionaries, how can anyone, even Jesus' own disciples be perfect? If we look further ahead in the Sermon on the Mount to Matthew Chapter 6, it seems apparent that by this point in Jesus' message, the crowds had begun to rejoin Him and were hearing His message. This is evident because of the way the tone changed when He introduced practices that were typical of the Pharisees in 6:1-2. He said to "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them" (6:1a) and "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets" (6:2a-b). Although Jesus' disciples may have had difficulties in controlling their personal behavior (as we do), they certainly didn't warrant Jesus' label of "hypocrites." No, Jesus reserved this label for His nemesis, the group known as the Pharisees. Now, with this context in mind let's read verse 48 in Chapter 5 again. How does Jesus love His "enemies" the Pharisees? Jesus said to the Pharisees and His disciples who were also listening, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The Pharisees were hypocrites, and many evidently thought that they were already perfect through their strident observance of the Law (Matthew 23:5-7). The Scripture clearly states that nobody can be made perfect under the Law, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). What the Pharisees didn't understand was that perfection was only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul said, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2Corinthians 5:21). Jesus provided the Holy Spirit to live within us as the source of our *spiritual* perfection. This spiritual perfection manifests itself in our radical obedience to God in going above the prescription of the eternal moral laws and the prevailing civil laws of our society. It's not that we won't ever sin but that our ongoing intention is to accomplish the work of God by being salt and light even to our enemies, the "Roman soldiers" in our community.

In summary, as Christians Scripture calls us to go beyond the law. Christians are called not only to observe the civil law (Romans 13:1-3) but to follow a standard above this body of law as well as a higher standard than the moral law that God has written on our hearts (Romans 2:15). God has provided us with His empowerment to follow this higher standard through the gift of the Holy Spirit Who is given to every believer who obeys (Acts 5:32). "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

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Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we said that as believers our spiritual perfection manifests itself in radical obedience to God in going above the prescription of the eternal moral laws and the prevailing civil laws of our society. Answer the following questions.

A. Who are the "Roman soldiers" in your life? Is it your neighbor with their relentless barking dog? Has a city official ruled against you in a zoning dispute? Did a police officer nail you in a speed trap at the bottom of the hill in your village? Is your spouse eroding the feelings of love you once felt? Are you tired of changing an elderly person's diaper? Is your coworker stealing your joy in the workplace?

B. How does knowing that God lives in your heart change the way that you view your enemies?

2. If holiness (being set apart) is God's vision for created human beings, then how might you cooperate more fully with God's plan?

Eye Witness Encounter – by Aida Karabu

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Eye Witness Encounter

Intro Quotes

"But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' Acts 26:16-18 (ESV)

"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him." Luke 8:39 ESV

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

Early on the first day of the week, after Jesus had risen, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had driven out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, who were mourning and weeping. And when they heard that Jesus was alive and she had seen Him, they did

not believe it. Mark 16:9-11

Jesus Appears to Two Disciples

After this, Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them as they walked along in the country. And they went back and reported it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. Mark 16:12-13

Later, as they were eating, Jesus appeared to the Eleven and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Mark 16:14-16

My life: Autobiographical Background

Hello!

I've been through a lot in life. I want to share it all, so that even when I die people can still learn from my life, and can see for themselves who brought me out of the pit and how, and what they can do to get out themselves with His help, and to illustrate that it really never is too late for anyone.

And to parents with children who are going through a lot of things like I did, I want you to keep praying and never give up on them.

Brace yourself, because, like many people, my story before I met Christ is not a pretty one.

Loosely, I grew up in church, but I turned away from the Lord, and when I was 14, I moved to the

UK to a prestigious boarding school to complete my GCSEs (sounds nice huh?). I was one of the few black girls, and I didn't have many friends in the slightest. I did complete them, and got A's and A*'s across the board in 10 subjects – with only one B (which just about shattered me at the time). I felt really sad and alone – but I kept it all in without an outlet. The girls there were sometimes, often, mean beyond description.

One day, I remember asking to be excused from class, and instead of going back to class I just broke down crying in an empty classroom. I just broke down. I had kept it all in for so long when I finally let it out I became indifferent, numb. I just wanted to disappear. I knew that no one would care or really notice if I did. Maybe just cruel gossip about where they think I might've left and my issues once I'm not there.

I finally broke the façade of the perfect girl slamming it at school, and as soon as my parents found out how I really felt, they shipped me back home to Ethiopia, where we lived at the time, and reassured me I didn't have to go back if I really didn't want to.

I felt like my life was over and I was ruined, that I was a total failure and that I would never make it, and so I did the natural thing, I dove into a downward spiral.

When the one thing I used to define my self-worth, my grades started to fall, because of anxiety at the new school after everything, and now that faith in God was a thing of mockery and a sign of stupidity in my mind based on what I believed about science and my secular standing at this point, I started doing all kinds of crazy negative things to try and cope.

I started smoking what the world touts as "harmless weed" to ease my heavy heart and mind, making friends with others who did this and who felt like they were also going in a downward spiral, going to crazy wild parties (fyi if you would like to know, the bible uses the terms carousing and debauchery to describe these exact pastimes), that I did to try and drown all the pain out. It didn't work.

Then "just for fun and relaxation" started to become drinking super heavily till blackout or throwing up at parties and sleeping around with people I had never met. At this point I didn't feel like there was anything worth saving, I had already even completely left behind my childhood commitment to

remain a virgin for my husband.

Then it turned into hard drugs. Miscellaneous pills from strangers and joints filled with unknown substances, other than weed. I was totally dead inside, and I hated everything I had become and everything I was. I needed someone to save me. I needed someone to love me enough to walk with me and guide me and fix me and make me a better person. I kept looking for this.

In my mind I was a total waste. For me all hope was lost. This is the part where I write this in the hopes that someone going through this or thinking of doing this will not go through with it.

Long story short, I had 5-10, brace yourself – suicide attempts – over the course of a few years. I still bear the scars on my arms. It was a total nightmare for my whole family. I tried to die by swallowing an entire bottle of pain killers, I drank bleach, I cut the mains electricity wire with a metal knife, I tried to hang myself, I took a whole pack of sleeping pills, I was taken away in an ambulance more times than I would care to count – and for some reason I just wouldn't die.

I remember thinking of God one day and just thinking "Why won't you just let me die? Are you so cruel to leave me suffering like this? Just leave me alone and let me die!" I was looking for peace, and in my misery I thought that death would bring it to me. I realize that it was peace that I was looking for, and not death. I only wanted to die because I thought that was the only way I could find true peace in life.

Now looking back, I now know it was God who kept me alive, although then it felt like cruelty, He didn't want me to die like that without me knowing true peace, which was Him. He was the one who saved me from my own hands each time, and He was the one who had all the good in store for me to see after He rescues me.

At that time I didn't know God at all, I had forgotten all about Him, but somehow deep down I knew that if someone loved me enough, deeply beyond all my worst failures and worst mistakes, that I would be fine. So, I changed my approach of sleeping with different kinds of men for sexual pleasure alone to sleeping around so that I could find this type of love. Newsflash, I didn't find it in men that way.

I didn't really tell anyone, but I resolved to get into a long-term relationship for this purpose. So in all my wisdom at the time I used dating applications like Tinder to find this. Most of those meetups ended up in one-night stands with strangers or simply didn't not go anywhere – until I met .. let's call him J.

We met at his house, and I loved it so much I just never left and I lived with him for about a year or so. But all of this in my past and all the scarring on the inside of me was still there, and I couldn't fix it, and neither could J.

I thought sexual love with a romantic partner would fix it, and it was the kind of long-term relationship I had dreamed of getting on Tinder, but he, although there was so much I loved about him, had his own issues and didn't know God either, and he just couldn't help me the way I was looking for.

He could buy me a whole new wardrobe, deck me out with the best makeup, buy me cool gadgets I could never afford or get from my family at the time, he bought me new shoes, he could paid for plain tickets and expensive vacations and weekend getaways for me, he bought me my favorite foods and loved me in all the ways he knew how. We picked out a house to live in and raise kids together, I thought I was as happy as I could ever be, but I still needed so much fixing, and I still had that longing for that other kind of love. This may sound like a perfect love, but J also caused me a significant amount of harm. Physically, emotionally and psychologically.

I realized my life would end up with me and him living in a small town with kids, wondering how my life ended up that way, with kids who alienated me because I was an imperfect mother, a husband who was estranged from me, hating my life, hating myself, and trapped. I didn't want that. So when it got to the point where I wanted to leave J and everything too, I realized my last resort to get this love and get my life and my soul fixed inside wasn't working. I realized I that I wanted to leave but I didn't have a reason. We already had so much history that I didn't want to end it, but it wasn't bringing me any satisfaction or fulfilment, many times it was taking away from me more than it was giving.

Philosophy Class

Interestingly enough, the thing that got me thinking about God again was a secular philosophy class. Philosophy 1306, Reality, Thinking, and the Self. I hadn't thought about God in a positive or serious light for as long as I could remember, even as far back as Sunday school although many times as a teenager I would tag along with my mom and my immediate family to church. Hearing, and I guess deep down sensing that Jesus was true and real, but believing God was unfair and Heaven was only for the select few who gave up everything and hard to work hard for it. I wasn't that. I couldn't raise the dead like Elijah. I didn't understand all the strange prophecies in the Bible. There's a lot of junk in there that didn't seem to make a lot of sense in a logical, modern scientific technologically advanced world I was living in. I have school to go to. I thought, I can't follow God and go to school at the same time. I would have to be a desert nomad and go into the desert and give up everything I knew and loved – it seemed like too high a price. So I swore a kind of hatred or vow against god in my heart, not consciously or verbally, but to continue living my life walking away from Him and disregarding His advice and commands with the aim to meet Him in Heaven on Judgement Day or whatever and blame it on His unfairness. I didn't care if I went to Hell, because I believed I could claim it was because of God's injustice. I thought I would somehow be more right than God, more holy, more honorable or more loving in some way by choosing to dive in. I think many, many people have made this deep unconscious decision in their heart, never really articulating it. Many of them may cover this secret decision with what they believe is scientific evidence which disproves the existence of God, or evidence that God is not just or is somehow a liar, or trying to keep something good from us from scripture. "Why would God kill innocent babies?", they ask. It never occurs to them that if they think God is equally guilty of it than equally so is anyone who kills a baby in the womb or a newborn. There are so many logical inconsistencies in these arguments that looking back I wonder at how I didn't see them before.

Anyhow, I was attending this Philosophy class at school online as I was living with J, and God came up in the course material. Just a general discussion, the Philosophy professor wasn't preaching per se, but he was presenting how some believe in the possibility of the existence of a creator because of the intricacy of the human mind out of the philosophical duty of presenting both sides of an argument.

However simple this philosophical conversation was, I can't remember exactly the topic, but God came up as evidenced by our minds as thinking things. Where did the mind come from? Can chemical and meat soup make a mind if left in a jar for thousands of years? I started to be intrigued. I remember talking to J about it. I was really excited. What if this higher omniscient (all seeing, all pervasive, everywhere at once), omnipotent (all powerful in terms of power and technological and mechanical wisdom) being exists? I said. Like an omniscient being that's always everywhere that sees everything that has just always existed. A different kind of being different from us, Ancient. Always been there. Has seen everyone and everything from the beginning of time. The philosophical notion of such a being make me excited and happy. The wisdom this being must possess. Like, there

was a possibility of a freedom and new wisdom and life and knowledge by somehow coming into contact with this being. Logically speaking, if such a being existed, I reckoned that it would have the wisdom to do things like teleportation, to different universes and realities that we are not even aware of. This all coming from my secular, atheistic and scientific world view. We think about such beings in science fiction all the time, it shows up in kids shows constantly. I just started to consider and realize the existence of a true, benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God in reality.

For some reason, when I was bringing it up as a question to J I actually believed it. I wasn't asking him for his opinion yes or no or to validate or deny my thoughts, they were already firmly planted, I was just sharing my excitement and thoughts to see how J would react. I can't remember at what point, but I was convinced. I never even once associated this being with the God of the Bible that I grew up with at church, I didn't see him as a 'God' in the religious sense at all, I was opposed to religion at this point in my life, in my mind such a beings existence was just a kind of scientific or philosophical possibility of the universe. If you are an atheist and you believe in aliens, you can't rule out that there might be some beings out there that exist outside our dimensions. Beings that have been around much longer, that know a lot more than we do, that can see through time and space.

I reached out to the Philosophy professor and I told him that whether or not he intended it, his course led me to conclude that there is a God and that i brought me back to my faith in Christ in a dramatic way afterwards. I don't know if he saw that coming, I wonder if he was atheist himself. He never said if he explicitly believed in God after the fact, I asked him and he told me that he would like to keep his personal views on God incognito, and He didn't reveal to me whether he did or he did not believe in a God explicitly either way, but I have my suspicions.

Come save me

So, I began to desperately cry out to this omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent being just to see what he would do. I wanted him to take me to another planet. Another existence. Another reality. I was just tired of life on Earth. If you know the reference, I wanted the being to take me to another reality and show me a new Kingdom like Thor took Jane to Asgard.

For some reason, because I know the fact of his existence was not brought into question, that it was a reality, that he would answer as long as I welcomed him as who he is and had an understanding of His power and his separation from us in terms of his power etc. He's just a being on a different scale of life, so I called out to Him jokingly for 3 days is straight, for some reason I knew that if I jokingly

called out to Him believing and knowing that He would show up if I just kept asking, he would. Now here is where you guys might not want to listen to me anymore. I didn't realize what the Bible said at the time, I only realized what it said after I saw what I saw and I started to read it:

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:24 ESV

"anyone who approaches Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." Hebrews 11:6 (BSB)

"'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'" Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV)

And one night, someone from that side of reality I was calling to did show up. And surprise surprise to my or maybe your atheist/agnostic self at that moment, it was none other than Jesus Christ.

The encounter

"the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." Matthew 4:16 NIV

"On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased." Psalm 138:3 (ESV)

One day I was in the other room sulking and feeling lonely. I am not going to omit that I was high, I was feeling very ashamed of myself, and very disgustingly gross in terms of hygiene (I hadn't showered, or brushed my teeth, and I was wearing pajamas all day).

When J finally walked in to check on me, to see if I was okay, I knew that he would end up doing or saying something to hurt me, to make me feel ashamed of myself, not worthy, not good enough. I

didn't want him to see me like that. Like the mess that I really was on the inside. But he came into the room anyways and I mustered up the resolve to love him anyways, because I didn't want to lose him. But I felt like I had nowhere to go to hide my shame and filth and disgrace from J, and I wish he didn't walk in and see me like that and change how he thought or felt about me by seeing me intoxicated like that. Looking back, seeing me intoxicated would have never made J change his mind about me. We got drunk together all the time, and J didn't mind when I was smoking or drinking marijuana drinks. The thing that made J change his mind and feelings about me was when I saw Jesus, and I was freed from alcoholism and drug use. That's what made him too ashamed to associate with me or love me anymore. When I started sharing that I saw Jesus and believing what He said, reading the Bible and dragging him to church with me. But anyways, that's jumping ahead.

When I looked up at J when he walked in, it wasn't his face there, I saw someone else's face superimposed over his body there that was glowing brightly like the sun – but not harsh – it was a soft light, I didn't have to shield my eyes.

He looked something like the following if you're interested. Note how handsome and majestic He looks, but he shines a lot brighter – with the light coming from within, like the second picture:

"Then the two from Emmaus told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread. And just as they were telling about it, Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them. "Peace be with you," he said." Luke 24:35-36 NLT

I had never seen that persons face before but I instantly knew who it was. He didn't tell me who he was. He didn't need to. He walked in and I saw Him shining bright like the sun with a crown on His head and a Jewish nose and long hair and I just knew who it was. He was smiling at me. A soft, "Surprise!", his smile said. There as so much compassion and love for me in His eyes. I felt like I had always known Him and He had always known me when I saw Him. His presence validated my entire existence. It justified me. If He is who He is and He was there with me and He loves me, then that's what makes me who I am. Not my mistakes or my failures, the fact that He is who He is and He was there with me for even just that one evening. It gave me the freedom to start again. To live a life free of the burden of my past mistakes. To live a life identified by the fact that He is real, He is literally on the throne of the universe, and He was there in that dingy single bedroom apartment room with me and J. Except only I could see Him.

I felt such awe and reverence, like I was in the presence of a King – He was wearing a golden crown shining like white light, and I remember I just chuckled and laughed to myself and said "But it's You!", "But You're Jesus!" I knew who He was, and He was there, in the room with me. Only I could seem Him in His minds eye. J had no idea what I was seeing.

If you've never read the Bible before, I don't care, in the Bible, someone else saw Jesus in a similar way, where the others around them couldn't see Him. Saul saw Jesus in his minds eye on the Damascus road. Only Saul could see Jesus:

The Damascus Road: Saul Converted (Acts 9:1-9 NKJV)

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ****and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, **and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.** Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It *is* hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord *said* to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." **And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.** Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought *him* into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

So, I felt the weight of His presence and His power and authority ***in the universe,*** He's well known throughout time and space and to other creatures, what the Bible would describe 'heavenly hosts' that I was not aware existed up until this point. Think of the creatures like the cherubim and the seraphim mentioned to be in the Heavens or the presence of God in scripture. There are other creations God has made in the universe.

But anyways, He was who He was and He was right there in front of me in person. I was honored to be in His Kingly presence, so I bowed low to the bed where I was sitting, because I felt like that's the most natural thing I could do in His presence, and the least I could do to show that I recognized who He was and that I was honored to be in His presence. He didn't force me to bow or ask me to bow. I think, deep down He wouldn't have been offended if I didn't. When Jesus was on Earth plenty of

people stood before Him and didn't bow, in fact, many people were compelled to mistreat him. He didn't mistreat them or command anyone to bow before Him, even though He knew who exactly who He was and who He would be the entire time.

He didn't say anything, but His eyes spoke volumes, volumes of love and forgiveness and compassion and understanding. He had so much love and compassion for me in His eyes. I understood that He actually knew me and was always with me, and was always there my whole life even when I didn't see Him and didn't know it. I saw that He loved me, and that He felt so much pain to see me in my pain knowing that no one would help, that He went out of His way to do whatever it took to just stop it and save me from my suffering, and He didn't even blame me for anything I had done, He just wanted to save me and put me out of my misery.

"The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me." Psalm 116:5-6 (NIV)

I felt true peace when He was there with me. True security. True love and understanding. Negative emotions were so far removed. I had no feelings of regret, or guilt or shame or condemnation. All of these emotions we're lifted in His presence. That's what He came to take away from me.

I'm happy from the inside out, and from the outside in, I'm firmly formed. You canceled my ticket to hell— that's not my destination!

Now you've got my feet on the life path, all radiant from the shining of your face. Ever since you took my hand, I'm on the right way.

Psalm 16:9-11 MSG

He didn't say "I died for you", to make me feel guilty, the crucifixion is not even something that He mentioned to me in that moment, that is just what it took to end my suffering, and now He was glad that my suffering was now over, "Its okay, stop crying I'm here" is basically what His love in front of me said, "Shh shh, stop crying, it's okay now, everything is going to be okay, I'm here now, It's okay." The calming comfort of a loving Father grasping His scared child in His arms, I lept with joy

into them with intense relief and shed a watery tear or two realizing who He was, feeling His peace, and knowing that He saved me and forgave me, and no one could make me feel guilt or shame or judge or condemn me because He was God's Son and He was in the room with me, He loved me, and if He didn't judge me and He's literally King of the Universe, who then on Earth had the right to? I realized that no one could use the guilt and shame of my past mistakes (or sins as the Bible would say) as a weapon to keep me bound and trapped in chains of fear, and to keep me from erasing past mistakes from memory and doing things the right way now. He gave me freedom. I had received a kind of presidential pardon and justification, I was in the same room as the resurrected Jesus I think. That alone just completely changed everything. Talk about a game changer. This one was free and undeserved, and an eternal one at that.

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." 2 Corinthians 3:17 ESV

He was smiling at me, and His compassionate, understanding, fatherly smile said, "You tried it your way right? Now are you ready to do things my way?", with a twinkle of light and compassion in His eyes.

I felt a love and a grace so deep that I thought no one could've ever got that from the Bible, and that all the religious people really didn't get it, until I read the Bible for myself after seeing seeing who I saw, and I realized that's exactly what the Bible had been saying the whole time about Jesus, and love and how all the religious people that didn't know His love didn't get it at all, which is kind of mind blowing to me at least. I just didn't know what it said.

"So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." 1 John 4:16

"Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." 1 John 4:8

"How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!" Psalm 36:7

"For your faithful love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness reaches the clouds." Psalm 57:10

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(CSB)

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people" Titus 2:11 (ESV)

Following

Over time following this, I started to become a completely different person. I started listening and watching sermons out of interest, and reading my new Bible, and going to church and trying to convince J to come with me.

I also started feeling really uncomfortable whenever I slept in the same bed or room as J, he'd reach for me and I would pull away, not because of anything He would've done to me, he would never ever hurt me in a million years, but because I started to feel like it wasn't right with God. I just had this overarching conviction or deep desire to not continue living in sin in that way, but it was a tough decision, because every desire of mine to live in sin and fornication was waning but I was still living there. And my body wanted to sleep with J every moment of every night as we had been doing for about a year, so I had to make a tough decision and just decide to ignore and not satisfy the passionate desires of my flesh.

So I started to sleep on the couch or in the other room. I thought God wanted me to stay with J and fix him and love him as my husband because I knew God was all about love now, but the pastors I talked to straightened me out letting me know that sleeping with someone unfortunately does not make them your husband. And J had made it clear that he didn't want to marry me, especially now that in his eyes I was just a religious crackpot who was mentally ill because I say that I saw Jesus. Anyways, this was just a temporary cohabitative situationship. As someone who didn't believe in God before, this didn't bother me. Just live with J and sleep with him, even have kids with J, I thought a marriage certificate and a ceremony wasn't that necessary to live like we were married. So it really did break my heart, because before I had hope that if I stayed with him we would eventually get married, and I still wanted him and our relationship, but I just didn't want the sin anymore. I wanted God more.

Sleeping with him just made it pre-marital sex, which is called fornication which is classified as sexual immorality in the Bible, and it is a sin. In other words, it is something that ultimately brings

unnecessary pain and heartbreak to our souls when we do it.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Hebrews 13:4 (ESV)

"Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God's people." Ephesians 5:3 (NLT)

"But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." Revelation 21:8 (ESV)

This can sound harsh, but notice it doesn't say no sex, it says, if it's sex, it's for life, which is what I had wanted at the start. J didn't want to marry me now that I was a believer and now that I was so pushy about him going to church and now that I was always trying to change him and I viewed him as flawed in his own words. I wasn't the same woman who had moved in with him. I had changed in a very drastic way, and this wasn't in the contract. If J believed me when I told him what I saw and that it was real, believed in Jesus and the Bible and got baptized with me, I would have not had a problem marrying J. He would still be my first choice. I just knew if we had completely different worldviews and purposes and meanings in life the marriage would have been difficult. One night, when we were sleeping in the same bed, I had a nightmare that J proposed. You may expect that any woman who dreams of their boyfriend proposing would be happy, gloriously happy! In the dream, it was dark out, nighttime and there was a hurricane blowing all around us. J had his signature beige jacket and beat up shoes and dry dandruff peppered blond brownish hair, he took a knee and he presented a ring. Except I started to panic, like I couldn't breathe and I felt like I was having a heart attack. I felt like I was making the greatest mistake of my life and I got backed into a corner and I had no way out. At this point we did things like listen to the book of Ecclesiastes together and watched Christian movies on PureFlix together and watched sermons together. But J would ask to change the channel then later that same night he would reach over to me at night and I was say no. I remember at one point I was crying deliriously, and I asked him to pray with me, because I sensed a coming judgement and I felt like we needed to beg for mercy from God because we we're living in sin before Him. I sensed the weight of the sin. J prayed with me for a bit. He prayed silently, but I felt unsettled, like he was just going through the motions to do whatever to keep me happy, not because he believed. Eventually, regrettably after I fight, I moved back in with my parents. Whenever we did talk or meet up I ended up sleeping with him again, so in the end we just stopped talking.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, I did gain enough self-control to learn how to resist the temptation to sleep with people who were not my husband. In any case, to enter a marriage with a non believer, would be what the Bible calls being unequally yoked. All in all, the Bible says don't do it because the unbelieving spouse will convince you overtime to abandon your faith or join theirs, or because the tension in the relationship and world views and priorities will ultimately lead you in different directions and approaches in life, tearing the relationship apart.

Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 (NLT)

Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction? Amos 3:3 (NLT)

Next, I made a declaration of my faith and symbolized the change that happened within me in public by becoming baptized in my mum's home congregation in Canada, and this was quite literally the happiest day of my life till this point, and it was a testimony to the whole church because they had really seen a big change in me. It also renewed hope for their friends and family members who also didn't believe and maybe were lost because of this new flame of renewed hope and affirmation that God really does still save in miraculous ways. More than anything, it was an answered prayer for my mum. All those years of diligent praying and desperately crying out to God to save my life, and man, did He answer! I was the prodigal daughter living in sin far away from home, and Jesus sent me back home answering my moms prayers.

I invited J to my baptism at my mums church but he didn't come, and I felt God's presence again so strongly and freshly, I had a completely fresh blank new slate on life, I was free! I could start again! I got what I was looking for all along, the redeeming love. I had found it given freely and without restraint in one of the most unlikeliest places to a young girl living in the 21st century, I found it Jesus.

It sounds incredulous, but I know that it's true. I know that this sounds like religious crackpot nonsense. Except I saw it and it's true. It seems so impossible yet it just simply is without explanation. I now know there's nothing impossible for God, and it sounds like I'm a totally changed person, because I totally am. It's one of those things that many people just sometimes don't believe unless they see it themselves.

"Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." John 3:3 (NLT)

Jesus appears to (sometimes called 'Doubting') Thomas Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' (John 20:24-29 NIV)

That was me, I was a doubting Thomas, and now I saw what I saw and I'm telling you. So please believe me, but I understand why you might find it hard to believe. If not me, read the Bible and believe Jesus, what He said, that He lives today, and that He's coming back to take true believers to where He is forever, at some point in the future, that I eagerly hope and pray for.

As a result, a lot of the negative addictions and cycles in my life and the desires to continue in them we're broken overtime. Overtime I realized they we're bad for me, and I didn't have a reason to do them anymore. I realized it was more self harm than anything. And the redeeming love of God have me a license of forgiveness so that I felt free to stop. I don't drink anymore, I don't smoke weed anymore, I have not watched porn and I don't sleep with men I've never met anymore. In terms of faith, I used to identify as an atheist existentialistic nihilist since I was 13-ish, and now I found a whole lot more than anything I thought I could ever find, better than anything I could have ever wanted in one singular moment. Better than a million dollars, better than a boyfriend, better than life itself. I found Jesus and the literal way to immortality. Talk about a plot twist. I did not see that coming in the plot of my life. Someone did. God did. God always knew in advance. Jesus has been alive all those 2000 years or so since His death, I think He will be alive a lot longer after that as well.

So I renewed my commitment of celibacy 'till marriage, 'till death or 'till Jesus return. I'm more forgiving, I'm more loving, I'm more understanding, I have way more self-control, I have a hope to pick me up and a comfort to rely on when I'm down and divine direction and wisdom to go back to when I feel aimless and I need guidance. All because I came to a point so low in my life, after I had exhausted every other option, I called on Him. All because when I called to Him He came to the rescue. I want you to know that you can have this too, it's free gift to all who ask for it.

"Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28 NLT

"Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life." Revelation 22:17 NLT

You can call on Him too. I have deep assurance and hope and security in immortal life and His return one day because I saw Him, it's a kind of assurance that always stays deep within me in the midst of distress.

"God rescued me from the grave, and now my life is filled with light." Job 33:28 (NLT)

I wrote this to tell you that just asking God for help can do what all the psychologists, well-meaning family members, motivational self-help journals, medications, drugs, alcohol, sex, women, and men combined could ever do in a lifetime for the fixing of your soul in one moment, and for free. Why not call on Him? What do you have to lose? You might lose an opportunity to have something far above anything you we're ever looking for or expected in your life.

I don't believe in Jesus or the Bible because a Pastor preached it to me, because I was raised a Christian, because someone told me to, or because I was convinced or taught it by a person. I was minding my own business and I saw Jesus, alive and well, standing before me shining like the sun exactly like the Bible says while I was probably still a professing atheist against the God of the Bible at that moment. I believe in the Bible because I saw Jesus, and it corroborates with everything I saw. It all checks out. It explains everything crystal clear. If you're like me in the past or J, and you have a problem with blind faith, this is not a blind faith. It's not really even faith, because faith is defined as "The assent of the mind to the truth of a proposition or statement for which there is not complete evidence" by the The Century Dictionary. I don't know who would argue that I did not have conclusive evidence, therefore this by definition is not faith. It's just reality or fact.

Just like He showed Paul, Moses, Hagar, the disciples, Mary Magdalene and the women at the tomb, Sarah and Abraham. He hasn't changed how He does things. He's still the same God. After that, the Bible was perfectly authenticated to me as a historically accurate and relevant text. A never ending story penned by God, including me.

Never as a show of religion, but out of a realized need, you can communicate with God and ask Him to come into your life and become real to you, or you can just read these following Bible verses.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:24 ESV

Keep asking and calling on Him genuinely like you actually need Him until you get the answer you're looking for or you get a response or some kind of guidance.

Here are some helpful scriptures:

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved. (Romans 10:9-13 NLT)

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." (Acts 16:31 NLT)

""For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son." (John 3:16-18)

"For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." Mathew 10:13 (NLT)

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"Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."" (John 20:29 NLT)