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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-12-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah in which we will see a calling to respond to the Lord message before it's too late. Then we will move onto the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans and then close with an important Gospel lesson called the parable of the soils.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 55. The chapter opens with an invitation for everyone, even Gentiles (Isaiah 55:5) to partake of the benefits earned by the Suffering Servant in chapter 53 whom we know was the Lord Jesus. Isaiah said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost" (v. 1). Isaiah then went on to say some of the most often quoted verses from the Old Testament. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Isaiah explained God's invitation to salvation to everyone as well as an important insight into the nature of God.

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6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

The Prophet emphasized the need for a person in the Old Testament to see the Lord before it was too late (v. 6), repent of their sin (v. 7a), trust in God's ability to forgive sin (v. 7), and recognize their insufficiency and sovereignty of the Lord (vv. 8-9). Now let us move onto the reading that begins at verse 10.

First Reading:

10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Isaiah said that in the same way that the seasons are regular and reliable (v. 10) so it is that God's Word is regular and reliable (v. 11). The rain and snow water the seeds and make them fruitful. Therefore, God's Word operates in the hearts of His people through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-13) in order to make them fruitful. Later in the Gospel lesson, the importance of this principle will become evident in Jesus' parable of the soils.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Before we move onto the Gospel lesson and continue to learn the importance of listening to the Word of God and the operating upon what is says, we will move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this section, Paul emphasized the fallen condition of God's creation in which both the creation itself and humanity are crying out for reversal of the curse brought on as a result of Adam's sin.

Second Reading:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:18-23)

Paul said that the "creation is groaning and [suffering]" (v.22) in labor pains along with our groaning while awaiting redemption (v. 23). The reward for our faithfulness in bearing fruit in our response to the Gospel message won't be evident until our bodies are redeemed when we die and go to be with the Lord (v. 23). Until then our spirits groan (v. 23) and so does the fallen creation (v. 22).

Have you ever noticed how the sound of wind whistling through the trees is a way in which the creation groans as it awaits redemption? I remember one particular evening when I was deer hunting in the woods on my parent's farm back when I was a teenager. As the sun was getting ready to set, I crept along through the pine forest being careful to move upwind in order to surprise any deer that may be wandering about in the woods that windy evening. As I continued to move through the woods, I stopped for a long time and just listened to the eerie sound of the wind moving through the trees. Although I had heard the wind moving through the trees before for some reason that evening it took on a special significance. The sounds in the trees worked in an opposite way of a chord, they clashed in such a way as to leave a lasting impression upon me that evening. I was glad I was carrying a gun. "The whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (v.22).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, pause for a moment and imagine what it would have been like to sit at the feet of Jesus and not only hear his teaching but also have it privately explained to you. That is what happened in the Gospel lesson from Matthew 13 in Jesus' famous parable of the soils. The context is just after the Pharisees scolded Jesus' because his disciples had picked and eaten from standing grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2). Jesus used this occasion to proclaim his Lordship,

saying, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (v. 8). He then went on to offend the Pharisees even more by healing a man with a withered hand, an action that caused them to "[conspire] against Him, as to how they might destroy Him" (v. 14).

The parable of the soils in the reading today from Saint Matthew is also found in a parallel account in chapter 8 of Luke. This parable is unique from many of the others because in both accounts Jesus went on to explain the meaning to his disciples privately away from the crowds.

Gospel Reading:

1 That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2 And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. 3 And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear." 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; 15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.' 16 But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. 18 Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20 The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the

world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:1-23)

This parable focused upon the Gospel and the impact of it upon people's lives. Jesus explained the parable to His disciples and then told them how they were blessed because their eyes were open and their ears have heard (vv. 14, 16). They were blessed because they had heard things for which the prophets waited. Saint Peter said about them that they were, "seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1Peter 1:11).

Some people may ask one of two questions. First, why did Jesus guard the truth by speaking in parables? Jesus answered this in verse 13, "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." Saint Peter shed additional light on this in his Epistle when he was teaching about the false teachers that he prophesied would come into the church and had been troubling the church:

For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire'" (2 Peter 2:21-22).

Peter said that that it "would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them" (v. 21). Jesus taught in parables as a means of grace by reducing the amount of light given to those that would **not** respond to His Gospel message. On the Day of Judgment, everyone will be accountable to God for how they responded to and used the information that they had. Paul said, "So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). A half dozen other verses in the Bible say that we are judged according to our deeds, meaning the fruit which we bore with the knowledge we were granted. [For further information see the following: Job 34:11; Ps 62:12; Pr 24:12; Jer 17:10; Jer 32:19; Mt 16:27; 1Co 3:8; 2Co 5:10; Re 2:23; Rev 20:12; and Rev 22:12.] This is the meaning of the parable of the soils; we are accountable to what we have heard although only one of the soils produced any fruit. Three of them are what Jesus called the "broad road" (Matthew 7:13). Only the seed that fell on the good soil produced any fruit, and then the production was in different measures. Additionally, note that fruit bearing is **evidence** of salvation, not the cause of it (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Second, some have asked the question, what about the heathen in far off places that have never heard the Gospel, how will they be judged? [Hint: See Romans 1:19.] In this case, we need to set back, reconsider the question, and ask a different one. The question we should ask is what about us, what have we heard and what fruit have we born in response to the testimony of God's Word in the Bible?

Saint John wrote about the differences between the unfruitful hearers and those whom responded to the Gospel by producing good works for the Lord Jesus:

9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. 10 The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. 11 And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:9-13)

Even though we work alongside the other types of soil, as believers in Jesus Christ we can rest assured that God will accomplish the good works that He began within us (Philippians 1:6). Our good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ. Though some will produce more than others (as we saw in the parable), each believer **will** produce something precious in the eyes of the Lord. As we saw in the first reading it's important to act upon the information that we have been provided before it's too late.

Reflection Questions

1. We read in the Gospel lesson the subject of fruit bearing of the four different types of soils. What would you understand "fruit" to represent? What are some worries or other distractions that make you unfruitful in your Christian life?

2. What are some fields in which you have the opportunity to sow seed?

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3. Some have taken the challenge of fruit bearing by instead going about their lives as "soil testers" or "fruit inspectors." Based upon what you have learned today why is such a "ministry" ungodly?

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_07-12-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-05-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The first reading highlights a prophecy of Jesus who came humbly the first time riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. However, He will return a second time in justice and power to claim victory over a world entrenched in war against Him and His people. In the second reading, we encounter the contrast between those who had Jesus' Spirit living inside of them and those who are driven purely by their carnal, spiritually dead natures. As we move to the Gospel lesson, we will learn about how Jesus relied upon prayer to God the Father for His spiritual victory. The last reading gives us insight into the communication that occurred between these two Persons of the Godhead, which is a pattern for the type of communion that God wants with all of us (John 17:20-21).

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah was one of the twelve Minor Prophets, a term that indicates the size of their writings in contrast to the larger Books written by the Major Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Zechariah wrote during the exile of the Jews to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem with Zerrubbabel, also known as Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8) the leader of the tribe of Judah. One of the things for which Zechariah is known is the prophecy of the flying scroll (Zechariah 5:1-11). This message symbolized the Word of God that had been disobeyed by Israel and the moral components which were also broken by the entire world. The message called for judgment according to God's righteous rule. The context of the reading for today is during the reign of the Persian King Darius some two years before the Jews rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. In Chapter 8 Zechariah had prophesied about what we know today as the return of the Lord Jesus to Jerusalem. He said, "Thus says the LORD, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain'" (Zechariah 8:3). Chapter 9 opens with a prophecy against the nations surrounding Israel followed by a pronouncement that God would deliver His people. "But I will camp around My house because of an army, Because of him who passes by and returns; And no oppressor will pass over them anymore, For now I have seen with My eyes" (Zechariah 9:8).

As you study the reading take careful note of the prophecy of the Coming King and remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11).

First Reading:

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; and the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

In this prophecy, we see both advents of Jesus compressed into three short verses. Verse 9 contains Zechariah's prophecy that was fulfilled on the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey on Palm Sunday. In verse 10, the tenor suddenly changed from one of a triumphal celebration of the coming Messiah to one of war. At Christ's Second Advent, He will cut off the world war (v. 10a) and "He will speak peace to the nations" (v.10b). Finally, Zechariah said that the territory under the

reign of the king would range from the Euphrates River all the way around the earth.

The war about which Zechariah was speaking is the war that will come with the appearance of the man known in Scripture as the Antichrist. Saint Paul said, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This "man of sin" will fill the world's vacuum for a leader and will seize power by intrigue (Daniel 11:21). We can take comfort in knowing that one day Jesus will return to the earth to usher in worldwide peace and bring in an era of justice. When we see wars and rumors of war all around us, this does not take God by surprise. He is waiting for the perfect timing to bring His Son back to rule and reign on the earth. Second, we can rest in the fact that although Zechariah probably didn't understand the prophecy that he wrote, he faithfully recorded it in the Scriptures. We can trust that the prophecies such as this one from Zechariah provide important, after-the-fact, confirmation of the accuracy of God's Word, even if they are hard to understand before the events have played out. This gives us confidence to follow God's Word, because we know that it is not manmade, it is supernatural.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul opened Chapter 8 in Romans by explaining the difference between a person that was born again through the Spirit of God and the one whose heart was set on the flesh (Romans 8:6). The believer, whose righteousness is found through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, is in a right relationship with God. Paul said, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). Next, he explained the significant contrast of the heart of the unbeliever. "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:6-8). This context is helpful in understanding the word "however" which serves as a contrast and opens today's reading beginning in verse 9. We included verse ten although it didn't appear in the reading.

Second Reading:

9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though

the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. 12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh– 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:9-13)

Paul said that a person must have the Spirit of God dwelling in them in order to belong to Him. This is the same thing that Jesus explained to the Jewish ruler Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night, which I like to call "Nick at night." Jesus told him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3b-ff). Jesus and Paul taught the same very important scriptural truth, a person must be indwelled by the Holy Spirit of God in order to be one of His children. This indwelling happens the moment a person surrenders his or her life to Christ for salvation. Whether or not they sense anything tangibly, this is when the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of a believer. It is a mystery of God (John 3:8), but something we can be assured happens because of the reliability of God's Word.

Paul further explained that although the believer's body would die because of sin, their spirit was made alive (quickened) because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ imparted to them through faith (v. 10). Next, Paul gave words of hope for believers by saying that since Christ was raised from the dead someday our bodies will also be given eternal life (v. 11). Finally, Paul called believers to put to death the carnal, fleshly behaviors inherent in our sinful nature through the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

It is important for us to pause here and contemplate what Paul said regarding the calling of believers towards holy living. "[F]or if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (v. 13). His teaching on this matter took the form of a set of "if then" conditional statements. **If** a person who doesn't have the Spirit of God lives according to the natural flesh, which of course is the only direction they know to take, **then** they will die. But **if** you who are indwelled by the Holy Spirit (are born from again, born from above by the Holy Spirit, John 3:3) **then** you will have empowerment from God's Holy Spirit to live according to the purposes of the Spirit, who inherently has life. Jesus is the empowering force that lives within us through God's Holy Spirit, enabling us to turn from the natural inclinations of our sinful flesh and towards the things of the Spirit. It's not so much that God doesn't like unholy living and punishes it with death, it's more about the natural course of consequences that are inherent in the universe that God designed. He pleads with people to choose life, but often times we choose death (Deuteronomy 30:19). Paul makes a striking case for the ongoing growth of believers to become more and more like Christ, from the inside out, because we have a new relationship of

grace with His Spirit who "teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness" and calls us to righteous living (Titus 2:12).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The context of the lesson is when Jesus was traveling from city to city with the disciples (Matthew 11:1) to preach and teach. Jesus had some not-so-nice things to say about His experiences there. "Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent" (Mt 11:20). Jesus used several examples of the cities to which He had visited, then spoke about Capernaum, a town located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, a town that possibly was the location of Saint Peter's home. "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day" (Matthew 11:23). We pick up with the reading in verse 25.

Gospel Reading:

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. 26 Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. 27 All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. 28 Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:25-30)

Here we see a prayer between God the Son and God the Father, given by Jesus in a public setting so as to provide the hearers with certain important spiritual insights. Remember that Jesus had just finished speaking about the urgent need for the people to repent. In His ministry, Jesus had taken over where John the Baptist had left off with this urgent call of repentance. Frequently the "wise and intelligent" (v. 25c) find it quite difficult to humble themselves and become like infants (v. 25c). God asks us to come to him humbly (Matthew 5:5) and rewards those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Jesus revealed several very important spiritual truths in this passage:

- God has given Jesus complete sovereign control over the earth.
- The only Person with a true understanding of God the Father is God the Son AND those to whom God the Son has revealed Himself.
- Jesus has provided the believer a position of rest. We not only do not have to earn our salvation but we also may rest and trust in our righteous standing with God. We saw this in the second reading today from Romans 8 as well.
- The way of Jesus is easy compared to the way of the religious. In those days, the religious leaders were called Pharisees and they thought they earned their salvation by doing many religious things. In contrast, the believer's burden is light because the hard work that Jesus did in earning our salvation is already completed. Nothing can be added to it no matter how hard we work. Therefore, being yoked to Jesus provides freedom from the burdensome labor of religion.

Jesus' calling is to the humble people, like Himself, not proud ones who are "carnally minded" (Romans 8:6) as we saw in the second reading. In the same way that Jesus pronounced curses upon the nations that did not repent, God will one day pronounce judgment upon each unbelieving person who doesn't repent. "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Romans 8:13). We can rest in our faith in Jesus for He said, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Mathew 11:29-30).

Have a great week being happily "yoked" to Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. We read about the difference between a person who is "carnally minded" and one who is motivated by the Spirit of God. How can a person know that they are saved? Read the following verses and write down a few ways in which a person can know they are in a right relationship with God.

Romans 8:16-17: 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if

children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

1 John 2:3-11: 3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: 6 the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. 7 Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. 8 On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining. 9 The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. 10 The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 11 But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

2. Pride is one of the things that keeps people from entering into a righteous relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Read the verses that follow and answer the questions below.

Proverbs 6:16-19: 16 There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: 17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises evil schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

James 4:13-15: 13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." 14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."

A. Why do you think that pride was first on the list of things which the LORD hates? How are all the rest of the evil things on that list connected to and/or generated by pride? In what ways does pride blind people to the scriptural truths of salvation through faith in Jesus?

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B. In what ways do you identify with what did James said about the self-confident person? In light of your answer, how could you pray to look at things differently this week?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-28-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we a little bit about the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. We will see how God empowers us by resting in His omnipotent power as well as providing us with reminders of His marvelous grace by looking back to our baptism.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is more strange and mysterious goings on of Elijah's replacement, Elisha. Today's reading is just after Elisha's miraculous replenishment of the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1 – 7). In the reading, we see yet another of Elijah's great miracles, the birth of a child to a childless Shunammite woman whose husband was very old. This was in repayment to her for the many kindnesses that she had done for him (2 Kings 4:1 – 13). We know from the text that follows, this miracle child would later die and be miraculously resurrected through another miracle (2 Kings 4:32 – 35).

First Reading:

2 Kings 4:8-11 NAS95 8 Now there came a day when Elisha passed over to Shunem, where there was a prominent woman, and she persuaded him to eat food. And so it was, as often as he passed by, he turned in there to eat food. 9 She said to her husband, "Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God passing by us continually. 10 "Please, let us make a little walled upper chamber and let us set a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; and it shall be, when he comes to us, that he can turn in there." 11 One day he came there and turned in to the upper chamber and rested.

2 Kings 4:14-16 NAS95 14 So he said, "What then is to be done for her?" And Gehazi answered, "Truly she has no son and her husband is old." 15 He said, "Call her." When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. 16 Then he said, "At this season next year you will embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant."

Omitted: 2Ki 4:17 The woman conceived and bore a son at that season the next year, as Elisha had said to her.

Gehazi was Elisha's attendant, although his motives may not have been entirely pure towards the Shunammite woman, pointed out to Elijah her desire for a son. Perhaps Gehazi though that he would supplant the woman's elderly husband. Instead, God brought about a miracle reminiscent of the birth of Isaac to Abraham.

Th big idea here is that God is a God of miracles. God sees the larger picture and fills people's needs even without their asking. Although God does desire for us to ask to fill our needs (James 4:2), He is

able to go above and beyond to provide even the things which we don't ask for because we think that they are too big for God to provide. This helps us to persist through times of persecution and suffering. We can be thankful to God for giving us these vivid reminders through the scriptural writings of those believers who went before us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Romans in Paul's teaching on a believer's unity with God through Christ.

Second Reading:

Romans 6:3-4 NAS95 3 Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Omitted: Romans 6:5-7 NAS95 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; 7 for he who has died is freed from sin.

Romans 6:8-11 NAS95 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. 10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. 11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In the reading, we learn much about the Christian life. We identify with Christ through our water baptism (v. 3). We see a contrast between the old self (v. 6), and our new self who is no longer a slave to sin (v. 6b). This fundamental transformation is brought about through the conversion of our soul. Our dead soul was symbolically buried with Christ at our baptism (v. 3), while our new self

came to life when we became united to Christ through faith (v. 8, Ephesians 2:8-9). The big idea is that as believers we are united with Jesus. Our lost souls were united in Jesus' death for us. Then we were united with Jesus and given a new soul through His resurrection from the dead. These truths are vividly expressed through the act of water baptism which symbolizes a believer's death to the world and resurrection to the newness of life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understand our identity in Christ, and holding to it helps us to persist during times when we are persecuted for our faith. As we move to the Gospel reading we will learn more about the promised persecution of believers in Jesus. We can hold onto God's promises and remember that He is a God of miracles even while facing challenges brought about by our faith.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the reading from Matthew is Jesus' private message to the twelve disciples named individually by name (Matthew 10:2-4). The chapter opened with Jesus sending the disciples on a missionary journey with very specific instruction to bring nothing with them and to expect persecution. This first mission was specifically to the Jews, they were to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (vv. 5-6). Jesus sent them out as "sheep among wolves," to be "wise as serpents," "innocent as doves," and to "beware of men" who would persecute them (vv. 16 – 21). They were not to fear them and Jesus reminded them that "even the hairs of the head were numbered" (vv. 26, 30). Jesus' instruction in this preface to today's reading extended not only to the immediate context of His disciple's immediate journey, but also as instructions for all believers going out into the world to spread the Gospel message. "I say to you, you will not have gone through all of the towns of Israel before the Son on Man comes" (v. 23).

All our longtime readers will understand, the addition of the two verses before today's reading is to provide the fuller context of the reading. As you read, take special note of repeated words, phrases, and patterns in the text.

Gospel Reading:

Verses before today's reading:

Matthew 10:34-36 NAS95 34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; 36 and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.

Today's Reading Matthew 10:37-42 NAS95 37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it. 40 He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. 41 He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. 42 And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

The reading is filled with multiple repeats of certain phrases, and the use of a literary technique called parallelism. In the first case, we see the phrase "not worthy of Me" or just the word "Me" repeated multiple times in verses 37 – 40. I counted a total of eight repeats of the word "Me" and three of the phrase "not worthy of Me." The latter condition, literary parallelism, occurs throughout the reading. Both literary techniques are used to bring attention to the big ideas in the text, the conflict arising from one's choice to follow Jesus and the rewards of doing so. We see,

"Jesus brought not peace / but a sword."

"Jesus pits man / against father."

And, "Daughter / against mother," "daughter in law against mother" (imagine that!).

"He who loves their father or mother more than Me / is not worthy of Me."

And, "Loves son or daughter more than Me / not worthy of Me."

A person "Not willing to carry one's cross / is not worthy of Me."

"People receive your Gospel message / receives Me."

The reward for persisting in all the conflicts that Jesus warned us about, are the rewards of a prophet (meaning anyone who carries Jesus' message), and a righteous man (meaning all believers) "vv. 41 – 42), eternal rewards which shall never be taken away "v. 42c).

What does it mean to take up one's cross, follow Jesus and persist during persecution (v. 38)? I remember back in my childhood while attending catechism classes how I was taught about the burden of carrying one's cross. The context of this teaching, as I remember it, was more about continuing a grueling journey of self-sacrifice rather than the big idea presented by Jesus in the reading. Here Jesus presented the concept of making hard choices through God's empowerment of us to oppose the worldly kingdom in favor of following Him and presenting His message to a God rejecting universe. Jesus is clear that these choices could even include forsaking one's own family in order to follow what Jesus is calling one to do. As followers of Jesus we understand that carrying one's cross for Christ is joyful, not the drudgery I imagined from the picture portrayed in my catechism classes. Jesus said just a few verses later, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. Mt 11:30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). The bottom line of the reading is that as believers in Jesus we must expect persecution and make the hard choices that God calls us to do.

There is a popular song from the 70's by Rupert Holmes named "Him" in which the chorus line says, "Him him him, what's she gonna do about him?" The meaning of the song is **far** different than our spiritual relationship with God. However, if you are someone like me whose mind is often filled with repeating chorus lines, we do have to ask ourselves the question. Him him him, what are **we** going to do about him? Jesus calls us to decide what to do about **Him**. It's Him or it's me. Serving God or serving self. This is a conscious step of faith one must make. As believers, we rejoice in the fact that regardless of how we may feel from day to day, our final judgment is not guilty. Jesus has borne our sins on the cross forever. He bore the penalty of our sin by suffering in our place, something that only the perfect sinless Son of God could do. We cannot increase the burden of personal cross and add anything to what Jesus completed for us through His carrying of the cross once and for all.

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Reflection Questions

1. As you contemplate the story of Elijah's miracle from the first reading, what are one or two things for which you would like to ask God? Share these with a another believer and ask them to pray that God would bring them about or a change in circumstances.

2. What is your perspective on carrying your cross? In what ways does understanding Jesus' promise of persecution help you in this regard?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-21-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about suffering and persecution, first from the Prophet Jeremiah, then from Saint Paul and Jesus.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. This passage is set amongst the backdrop of Israel receiving dire consequences for rejecting God's rule in their lives. Jeremiah, a true prophet of God, had been beaten and mistreated by a false priest named Pashur (Jeremiah 20:1-2). While Jeremiah proclaimed cursing on Pashur in a veil of confidence, this section of verses in our reading shows that inwardly he was troubled by the persecution he faced. This is Jeremiah's prayer of complaint before the LORD.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 20:10-13 NAS95 10 For I have heard the whispering of many, "Terror on every side! Denounce him; yes, let us denounce him!" All my trusted friends, Watching for my fall, say: "Perhaps he will be deceived, so that we may prevail against him And take our revenge on him." 11 But the LORD is with me like a dread champion; Therefore my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will be utterly ashamed, because they have failed, With an everlasting disgrace that will not be forgotten. 12 Yet, O LORD of hosts, You who test the righteous, Who see the mind and the heart; Let me see Your vengeance on them; For to You I have set forth my cause. 13 Sing to the LORD, praise the LORD! For He has delivered the soul of the needy one From the hand of evildoers.

Jeremiah's suffering at the hands of an evil man provide an important lesson for those of us who follow after him. Just like Jeremiah, we cannot control how people treat us. But we can take our complaints to God and ask Him for justice and help.

Jeremiah was quite graphic in his lament, showing that he could be brutally honest with God about how he felt and what he was experiencing. He felt persecuted by his enemies and realized that even his friends had turned against him, waiting for him to mess up. Jeremiah was in a very, very difficult place, and could have relieved his suffering by denouncing the LORD and His ways. But he stood firm in his convictions, banking his life on the justice of God to prevail. These are some of the things that Jeremiah knew were true about God:

- God listens (otherwise he wouldn't waste his energy praying)
- God is a champion, which causes the enemy to fear

- God's justice will prevail in an everlasting way
- God is the LORD of armies (hosts)
- God tests the righteous
- God knows the mind and heart of humans (we can't pull the wool over His eyes, so to speak)
- God will deliver vengeance upon the enemy
- God is worthy of praise, even in the midst of persecution and suffering
- God delivers the soul of the needy from the hand of evildoers

These important truths can sustain us in the midst of trials as well. Just like in Jeremiah's case, it may not seem like God is in control, but He is providing an opportunity for His children to walk by faith and not by sight. When we cannot see God, and it doesn't make sense to keep trusting Him, we are in a great test of faith. God highly values our faith (Hebrews 11:6) and will allow trials to come into our lives so that we might internalize the reality of His existence apart from receiving immediate rewards. That is why James says that we can "count" it all joy when we face trials of many kinds (James 1:2-3). For God is working to produce a higher vision in us—a vision of maturity and stability in Him that stays strong in spite of shifting circumstances.

Jeremiah's perspective can be our perspective as we encounter disappointing and debilitating things in this life.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

One of the debilitating experiences that all of us face is the loss of someone we love. At the loss of a loved one, many of us contemplate existential things: life, death, meaning, and purpose. We wonder why life has to end and whether there is meaning in our existence, if we will all end up in the grave at some point. These existential questions are dealt with in the New Testament passage. Saint Paul, in the Book of Romans, provides some background logic that helps explain the universal reality that we all face: death.

This reading is set in the context of explaining the power of the Good News, which is that we can be free from the law of sin and death (Romans 6-8). Instead of feeling like paupers in the throne room of the King, Christians can bask in the lavish grace given by God. Paul carefully lays out the contrast between Adam's one sin, which affects all humans and Jesus' free gift of eternal life that overcomes the grave and results in abundant and eternal life. The gift of eternal life is an overwhelming extension of God's heart towards wayward humans. Paul reminds the reader that God sent His

righteous Son to die for unrighteous humans. "For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8). God's grace is not stingy or miserly. It is abundant and overflowing.

Second Reading:

Romans 5:12-15 NAS95 12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned– 13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.

Adam is the man through whom sin entered the world. In the Garden of Eden, Satan did not disclose to Adam the far-reaching and universal effects of his choice to live outside of God's provision. God had provided all of the trees in the garden for Adam and Eve's enjoyment, except for one (Genesis 2:16-17). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was excluded from their experience because the Lord knew that determining what is right and wrong was His responsibility. But Adam stepped outside of God's protective covering, and ate of the "forbidden fruit," thus exposing himself to a world he was ill-equipped to handle. While the effects of physical death were not realized immediately (Adam lived to be 930 years old according to Genesis 5:3-4), a spiritual death occurred instantly. Previously, they were naked and unashamed, but now "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7).

Because Adam represented all of humankind and gave to us a sin nature, all of humankind receives the mark of death. God is not being mean-spirited in allowing death to reign in this world, He is merely being consistent with the laws He had set forth from the beginning. Life apart from Him results in death. Life with Him and in Him results in eternal life.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul explains that everyone has sinned, even those who lived before the Law was established through Moses. In the days before Moses, people were still reaping the effects of sin, i.e. death, even though God had not given them the Ten Commandments. After Moses and the Law, people were not able to follow God better, they just were more aware of how far short they

were missing the mark (Romans 3:23). Paul's point is that either way you slice it (before or after the Law), people have been reaping the tragic effects of sin.

One of the greatest words in the Bible is the word "but" which shows up here in our passage as a huge turning point in the universal experience of the tragedy of death. Paul is almost overflowing with enthusiasm as he recounts the abundant grace of God displayed in Christ Jesus, the One who "was to come" (v. 14). For if Adam's sin permeated all of humanity to bring death into the world, how much more would Christ's life counteract this tragedy and actually re-tell the story of humanity, showering us as actors in the story with the possibility of redemption. The grace of God does not just cancel the many debts, it provides richly for those who accept the free gift offered in Christ. We do not have to quiver before God the Father if we are in Christ, for He has provided grace upon grace (more than enough) to root us and establish us in His love. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). This is a game-changer, for in Christ, the story of our lives can have meaning and purpose, not just here but for all eternity. Death is not the final chapter and no longer deals a tragic sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). This is the victory that is ours in Christ!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Because we have such a great Savior, who has justified us though our sins were many, our loyalty to Him should far outweigh our loyalty to our own physical comfort or ease in this life. The cost of discipleship is not hard to pay when we realize what a great salvation He has provided for us.

The cost of discipleship is something about which the Gospel reading deals. One of Jesus' most strategic ways of making a lasting impact in the world was to "disciple" a group of people in His way of life. He spent time with them and taught them about life in the kingdom of God, which was in sharp contrast to life lived under one's own reign. In the Gospel reading for this week, Jesus was preparing his 12 disciples to go out and teach others what they had been taught by Him. "Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness "(Matthew 10:1). He gave them specific instructions which would help them to be ambassadors for God's redemptive purposes in the world. He also warned them that the road of discipleship would not be easy. They would be persecuted, questioned, and hated (Matthew 10:17-25). The only way that they could move forward would be to know the truth claims that Jesus' would state in the following verses.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 10:26-33 NAS95 26 Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. 28 Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. 32 Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33 But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

Jesus gave the disciples support to help them overcome the trial of persecution that awaited them. The big idea of this passage was to share an eternal perspective that would give them comfort when they are wrongly treated for the sake of Christ. He reassured them that God, who is eternal, was keeping track of the injustices of this life and would hold humans responsible for their choice to be disloyal to Christ.

Jesus communicated several important points that can help each of us, who consider ourselves His disciples, as we face ill-treatment for the sake of Christ. First, He said to not fear those who mistreat us. Fear is only legitimate if there is no life after death. If this life is all there is, then we will find that the values of the Christian life are untenable. But because there is a God, who is eternal, and because He has made a way for us to live with Him, we can live our lives on earth with an eternal perspective. Jesus reminded his followers that there will be a day of reckoning and that God's final evaluation of a life is the only thing to fear. If evil people get away with things on this side of eternity, that is not the end of the story. Therefore, we can have confidence to share the truth of Jesus' teachings, even if it brings persecution and ill-treatment.

Second, since God sees and knows the smallest details of our lives (how many hairs on our head), how much more, then is He acquainted with the most important details of our lives? If God can keep track of the little things (sparrows), He surely is capable of keeping track of the bigger things. When we are suffering, Satan would like us to believe that God does not care about us and has lost track of what is best for us. These verses counteract that lie by pulling back the veil to see the supernatural realm, where God, who sits on the throne is actually intimately acquainted with the details of our lives. This truth can provide comfort and hope in the midst of trials and persecution for the believer in Christ. This truth should also be a warning for those who abuse God's people, for their evil deeds will not go unpunished.

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The main point that Jesus wraps up with is the reminder that our loyalty needs to be affixed to Him, no matter what pressure is on us. We may be presented with an easier road if we stay silent about our relationship with Christ, or we may even have our physical life spared if we deny Him. But we will forfeit our eternal soul—which is far worse than losing our physical life. Loyalty to Jesus in this life will translate into His vouching for us before the throne of the Father, thus atoning for our lack of righteousness in this life. That is called grace. But if we deny what Jesus has done on our behalf by rejecting Him in this life before men, there is no other way to the Father's heart and eternal rest for our soul. In another place, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but through me" (John 14:6). The centrality of Christ for eternal salvation is very clearly stated by Jesus in this and other passages. It is important that we prioritize this relationship above all other pursuits and pressures. That is what true discipleship looks like.

Reflection Questions

1. Review the list of attributes of God in the first reading that Jeremiah is banking on. What attributes are you having trouble believing are true about God based on your current or past circumstances? Talk to God about your desire to walk by faith in these truths, asking Him to help you to believe He is faithful to His Word. You might even have a spiritual friend to share this struggle with and ask for prayer support to grow in living by Truth.

2. As you think about the pressures you face to deny Christ, what form does persecution take in your life? What are the costs of discipleship? How can reflecting on the abundant grace of God from Romans 5 help you to count the cost of discipleship and stay loyal to Christ in the midst of persecution? How does the loyalty of Christ to you engender loyalty back to Him?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-14-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The focus of the readings this week is on the background and importance of communion. We open with a reading from Exodus in which Moses recounted God's provision of manna to the Hebrew people during their desert wanderings. Then we move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians with some teaching on the communion meal and then conclude with the Gospel lesson from John in which Jesus taught the people that He was the "bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). As you study this week keep in mind Saint Paul's admonition to examine ourselves before we partake of communion that will be covered in the reflection questions.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Deuteronomy 8. The context is God's giving of the Law to Moses after they had escaped from the wrath of the Pharaoh and struggled for forty years in the desert. The main audience whom Moses addressed were those who were either born during this 40-year period or those who were under twenty when it began. This was because all of the adults where were 20 years and older at the time of the Exodus perished except for Moses, Joshua, and Caleb (Numbers 14:29). The context of the reading today is Moses final address to the people about to enter the Promised Land. "Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: 'Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully'" (Deuteronomy 5:1). He continued in the next chapter, "Now this is the commandment, the

statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it (Deuteronomy 6:1). He then proceeded to recount the main points of the Law.

The reading that follows includes all of the verses that were skipped in order to provide the full context and to illuminate the complete meaning of the text.

First Reading:

2 You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. 4 Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. 7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. 11 Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 15 He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. 16 "In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. (Deuteronomy 8:2-16)

Moses' purpose of this address was to remind the people of God's miraculous provision and protection of them during their desert wanderings (v. 2). First, Moses recounted God's provision of clothing that did not wear out (v. 4a) as well as protection from injury (v. 4b). Second, Moses

reminded the people that they were disciplined by a loving God in the same way that a father disciplines his child (v. 5). He reminded them of the manna that God provided (v. 2) a food that pointed to God's supernatural provision as well as to looking forward to His coming Son the Lord Jesus who called Himself the "Bread of Life" (John 6:35) that we will talk about later in this study. Next, Moses gave the people some insights into the nature of the Promised Land that they were about to enter (vv. 7-9) and warned them about the dangers of forgetting the Lord and His commandments (v.11). He said that if they forget the Lord by not keeping His commandments their hearts would become proud in spite of His supernatural provision (v. 14). Finally, he reminded them of how God had delivered them from the fiery serpents (v. 15) provided water for them in the desert (v. 15), and fed them manna from heaven (v.16). Both the manna and the incident of the people with the fiery serpents prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ. The latter incident was recorded in Numbers 21 in which Moses instructed the people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sin and given eternal life as a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we saw in the first reading, the Old Testament provided many important parallels for the disciples and first Christians to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of God's predictions concerning the Savior. As we move to the second reading, we will see how Saint Paul spoke against the idolatry that was prevalent among the people of Corinth in the First Century. Paul reminded the people about the curse that was placed on God's people for grumbling against God as recorded in the Book of Exodus. Paul said, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction" (1 Corinthians 10:11) and urged the people to flee from idolatry (v. 14), "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." The issue that he was confronting here was the objection that some had to eating food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 10:18-33). The reading today is sandwiched right in the middle of this important discussion.

It is important to understand the context of the Book of 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote this Letter to church filled with disharmony and division. This particular passage is part of how he sought to unite the weak and immature Corinthian church. He focused upon the fact that they were all one through Jesus' sacrificial death, something that leveled the playing field because all are equal because of the cross.

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Second Reading:

16 Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Paul said is that in order to partake of the communion service we must be in unity together and in fellowship with God. Matthew Henry said it this way. "By partaking of one broken loaf, the emblem of our Savior's broken body, who is the only true bread that came down from heaven, we coalesce into one body, become members of him and one another." Unlike the pagan sacrifices which were repeated and never brought redemption to those participating, Jesus' single sacrifice resulted in salvation for all those who believe (1 Peter 3:18). Also, unlike the continual sacrifices offered by the Jews that looked forward to Jesus, Jesus can never be sacrificed again because after he made one sacrifice for sins forever He sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12). "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). When we celebrate communion we remember the single, final sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross (Luke 22:19). We celebrate the fact that when we share in the communion cup and the bread we unite in the belief that Jesus poured out His blood and allowed His body to be broken to pay the penalty for our sin.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from John Chapter 6. The context of the reading is after Jesus went from Jerusalem where He had healed a paralyzed man, to the "other side of the Sea of Galilee" (John 6:1). It was here on the east coast of the lake that Jesus went up on the mountain near Bethsaida to teach His disciples and was followed by a large crowd (v. 2). He evidently ended up teaching this discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum (John 6:59). Jesus opened this section of teaching with a bold statement regarding His deity. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). This is the core of the Gospel message, the Good News, that anyone who believes in Jesus as his or her Savior has eternal life. Next, Jesus made another of His bold statements that He was God in the flesh, the manna sent from heaven when He said, "I am the bread of life" (v. 48). The Jews would have clearly understood His use of the Greek phrase "ego eimi," translated in English "I am." Jesus is the eternal God, the preexistent One, the "bread of life" sent from God the Father (John 6:46) as the supreme and final sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:12).

As you read, notice Jesus additional use of the "I am" phrase, and how Jesus used this to confirm His identity as God in the flesh.

Gospel Reading:

51 "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh." 52 Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" 53 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. 54 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. 56 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. 57 "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. 58 "This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:51-58)

Jesus again affirmed His divinity when he said, "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven" (v. 51a). Next, He said that the way to eternal life was by partaking of His body (v. 51b), something which was a stumbling stone to the religious Jews and Pharisees (v. 52b). Jesus answered their objection by telling them that although their forefathers ate the bread of God (manna, see Exodus 16:1-36) and later died (v. 58b), anyone that partook of belief in Jesus would have eternal life. Jesus said, "he who eats this bread will live forever" (v. 58c). In the Jewish world, there was a high emphasis given upon the value of community that occurred around a meal. What Jesus said was that in order to partake of Jesus, the bread of life, you must commune with Him. One of the ways that we as believers commune with Jesus is through the communion meal.

This reading follows a train of thought where Jesus is explaining and defending His deity to both seeking and skeptical people. The disgruntled and skeptical Jewish leaders ask Jesus in John 6:42 how He could claim to be the contemporary version of God's "bread of heaven" when they knew both of his parents and had seen Him grow up as any normal boy and become a carpenter like his dad. Jesus therefore refers back to their common knowledge about how God worked in the Old Testament when he provided food from heaven called "manna." Instead of being physical bread, which had to be eaten regularly in order to live, Jesus referred to Himself as spiritual or "living" bread that came down uniquely from heaven. Jesus invited them to "eat of this bread" in order to live forever.

What does it mean to eat of His flesh and to drink His blood? We often focus on the communion service as the answer to this question. While participating in communion is a righteous, sacred ritual, we must not replace the ritual with the intended outcome. A better question is, what is the intended outcome of communion? Jesus partially answered these questions in the text of the reading. "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:56). Abiding in Jesus, relating to Him, doing life with Him is the end goal of communion. So, if we are not being drawn closer to daily trust and mindful awareness of Jesus' presence in our lives, something is wrong with how we are participating in the Lord's Supper.

What do the teachings from the readings and Gospel lesson mean for our lives? First, God calls us not to forsake the assembly together in the communion service (Hebrews 10:25). As we celebrate communion from now until the day the Lord Jesus returns we look back to the one sacrifice that He made for our sins. Second, we can recognize that we are saved by grace through faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9) the same as Moses and the other believers in the Old Testament. They looked forward to Jesus through the symbols of God's supernatural provision through manna and the healing by faith in God by humbly kneeling before the bronze serpent. The elements of communion are the way in which we remember Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed to pay the debts for our sin. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Reflection Questions

1. In First Corinthians 11 beyond what we read in the second reading today, Saint Paul called for believers to make a serious self-examination before the partook in communion. "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). He warned, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" (v. 27) and even went so far as to say that "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep" (v. 30).

If you take communion this week, as yourself the following question. What does it mean to "examine yourself" before communion? What are two or three things that you could bring before God in prayer this week prior to communion?

2. Read the following quote from Jesus that He said in the Sermon on the Mount.

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"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5:23-24).

What are some ways in which this verse speaks to the practice of examining ourselves before communion?

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_06-14-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-31-2020



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 onto 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).

Introduction to the First Reading:

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.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from 1 Corinthians is Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts. The opening verses of chapter 12, from which today's reading are drawn make this clear and provide some important contextual information. "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led" (1 Corinthians 12:1-2). It's interesting how Paul wrote about how the Corinthian non-believers were pagans whereas by implication these new believers were non-pagans. Their conversion to Christianity resulted in a change of character, from pagan idolaters "led astray to mute idols," to those transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2). Today's reading opens with the word "therefore" which provides a logical linkage to the people whose lives were transformed by God through their conversion by faith in Jesus Christ.

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 sins 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 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.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel reading records one of Jesus' post resurrection appearances to His disciples. 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. However, you can be assured that God will call you to use whatever spiritual gift(s) that He has given you to your fullest ability.

As I am writing this week's study, I just returned from the funeral service of a friend back in our hometown. The man who passed away was quite young (his mid-50's) and was a lifelong believer in the Lord Jesus. As I have been reflecting upon his life, one of the things that stands out to me is his faithfulness. Although God gifted the man in various ways, he used these gifts in serving him faithfully up until he got sick and died quickly. Although he was a simple and uncomplicated man, he was always faithful in helping others. Although God doesn't call everyone to do the same things for Him, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Reflection Questions

1. Although we looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today, 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. 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, and 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

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evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

2. One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other believers for sometimes we cannot clearly recognize our own gifting. This week, discuss this with another believer in Jesus who knows you well. What are your spiritual gifts, and in what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God?

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_05-31-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-24-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Today we celebrate the ascension of our Lord Jesus, remembering how He returned to heaven and God the Father before he commissioned His church to spread the good news of the Gospel throughout the world until the time that He returns.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The Book of Acts continues Doctor Luke's chronicle of the life and legacy of our Lord Jesus. This Book picks up after the closing of the Gospel of Luke in which right before Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised the eleven that they would be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The Gospel of Luke closed with Luke's telling of Jesus' ascension. "50 And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. 51 While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and were continually in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:50-53). Interestingly, the eleven disciples obeyed Jesus by staying in Jerusalem and were "continually in the temple" in spite of the fact that the Jewish leaders there were the ones responsible for His crucifixion.

First Reading:

Acts 1:1-11 NAS95 1 The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. 3 To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. 4 Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 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." 9 And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10 And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 11 They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

This opening section of Acts recounts how Jesus reaffirmed His commissioning of the church to be His witnesses not only to the Jews but to the entire world (v. 8). The question at hand for the disciples was whether Jesus would immediately bring in His kingdom on earth and overtake the

oppressive Roman rule (v. 6). Jesus didn't deny that He would establish such a rule in the future but rather told them that the timing was not for them to know, but was a mystery reserved only to the Father God (v. 7). At the conclusion of His message Jesus was taken up in a cloud, meaning that the Skekinah Glory of God had appeared in contrast to some sort of rainstorm. The closing verse was a message presumably from two angels, not men, commanding them to get busy with the Jesus' business which He had just directed them.

Today's reading marks the unfolding of the mystery of the church, something that was not foreseen even by the Disciples. We will see that in the Gospel reading where it says that "some were doubtful" (Matthew 28:17). The mystery deepened as Jesus left the disciples to build His kingdom, but without His physical presence. Although His disciples certainly knew the Scriptures, they didn't yet understand many of the elements of how they related to this future kingdom ministry. Remember how Jesus had explained to some of them on the Road to Emmaus about how the Scriptures spoke of Him and how he had to be killed in order for the next phase of God's plan to unfold (Luke 24:25-27).

A key point to remember from this reading is that Jesus didn't leave his disciples powerless, rather he promised to send then God's Holy Spirit which would empower them. God's. God's "dynamite" power would enable the disciples to unveil this new mystery of the church through various miraculous gifts which set fire first to Jerusalem and then to the entire world. As Christians, we have the power of God the Holy Spirit living within us. He empowers us to accomplish God's work in His kingdom until the time that He returns.

Second, the two men in white robes (presumably angels), said how Jesus would return in the same way that He had left them (v. 11). In other words, when Jesus returned, He would come by descending in a cloud of God's glory in physical form downwards from heaven. The men asked the disciples whey they were staring up into the sky. Obviously, angels had much more information about Jesus' kingdom and had we been there we too would have been staring up into the sky wondering what had just happened!

One day my wife and I were walking along a nature trail and heard the rapid fluttering of a bird as it flew away. Had we been looking up instead of down at our feet in order to keep from tripping on the rocky trail we would have been able to spy a bald eagle as it roosted in the tree shortly ahead of us. Instead, we only got to see the white tail feathers of this beautiful bird flying away from us, we had missed the opportunity to have the much fuller experience of its presence. After several events like this we learned to be more careful and focus farther ahead and keep looking up in order to have a chance to see things ahead that we otherwise would not have seen. We had previously said

something like, had I been looking up (or ahead) we would have seen it before it flew away. Now, our mantra is to look up so that we don't miss important things ahead. So it is in our spiritual lives. God calls us to "look up" and anticipate His imminent return. We are called to go about accomplishing His business and keep our eyes focused upon Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians we will see the unveiling of some details of Jesus' kingdom reign from heaven. Jesus rule during the church age is from His throne on the right hand of God the Father (Mark 16:19). Jesus rules from heaven where He "sat down at the right hand of God." We see this most clearly in the Book of Hebrews. *"11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified"* (Hebrews 10:11-14).

Second Reading:

Ephesians 1:17-23 NAS95 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Paul provided many insights into Jesus' kingdom, and asked the Ephesian believers to pray for wisdom so that they too may experience "the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (v. 18). Paul himself prayed they these believers' eyes would be opened to see and understand this treasure (v. 18a). He reminded them of how God through his mighty power raised Jesus from the dead and seated Jesus at the utmost highest throne in the universe (vv. 20-21). He closed with a marvelous statement about how God had given Jesus total rulership over all

things through His rulership over the church (v. 23). Here the word translated "church" doesn't refer as much to the technical translation as a religious assembly, but rather something fuller, more spiritual and mysterious since we see how Paul equated it to Jesus' body (v. 23a).

The church on earth is God's body of believers set apart to do His will until the time that Jesus returns. As Jesus' body is the church, we are in essence part of Jesus' body. We are God's special agents commissioned on His behalf. Our ID card is that of the Holy Spirit living within us. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the great power that lives within us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This short reading from Matthew's Gospel records what is called the "Great Commission" in which Jesus commands his followers to do several things until His return.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 28:16-20 NAS95 16 But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. 17 When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. 18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Jesus commanded His followers to do three things. 1. Make disciples of all nations, 2. Baptize them in the name of the Holy Trinity, and 3. To teach them to observe all that He had commanded them to do (vv. 19-20). These three things are the markings of the "Great Commission" given to all believers, not just the leaders of the churches. Jesus also affirmed His total power over everything, both in heaven and on earth (v. 18 b). Interestingly, God through Matthew recounted the secret thoughts of some of them in that "some were doubtful" V. 17c). Even after all they had seen some still had reservations about Jesus.

In light of all three readings we see Jesus' total sovereignty of everything both in heaven and earth.

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We see how God has both commanded us and empowered us to accomplish his plan through the mystery of the church. We learned how even those close to Jesus had doubts, but how Paul reminded us to pray for God's power which could delivers through this season of doubt. Finally, God calls us to keep looking up and anticipating His return.

Reflection Questions

1. When you reflect upon the Great Commission, in what ways are you accomplishing one of the three objectives?

2. How does living in anticipation of Jesus' imminent return (looking up), help you to accomplish the Great Commission? What are one or two things that you could change this week in our life in order to more fully accomplish one or more aspects of God's plan for you?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-17-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts and then move to the second reading where we continue to study in First Peter. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from John 14.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts Chapter 8. In order to understand the context we will back up to the beginning of the chapter. As we read from the section, remember that this picked up after the stoning of Stephen whom we read about last week. Let's first read that very important context before we move onto the text of the reading.

1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. 4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:1-4)

The persecution of the church resulted in the believers being spread about the region thereby further spreading the good news of the Gospel. The man named Saul, the one later known as Paul, brought about this unintended consequence. God continued to work in the church in a mighty way in spite of Saul's persecution.

The reading for today skipped verses 9 to 13. We included those verses in order to provide a clearer picture of what was happening after Philip began preaching the Gospel to the half-breed people known as the Samaritans, ones that the Jews considered unclean.

First Reading:

5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.
Omitted Section:]

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." 11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. 14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:5-17)

Philip's ministry to the Jews was extremely important because it marked a turning point at which because of persecution on Jerusalem the church began spreading to the Gentile world. This began first with the mixed-breed people known as the Samaritans. This was a group of people that were left over after the exile of the Northern Tribes of Israel during the Assyrian invasion in 722 BC. Even

though they had some similar religious beliefs as the Jews, they were excluded from the ministry of the temple in Jerusalem. What happened in the reading was that many from this group of people believed in Jesus. As a result, Peter and John came to Samaria in order to confer on them the Holy Spirit. Second, they commissioned these new believers for service by laying hands on them (v. 17). The big idea is that anyone, either Jew or Gentile, and even a person of the half-breed race of Samaritans can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and have their sins forgiven. The story about Simon the magician provided additional testimony to the fact that anyone cane believe and be saved, even someone that was formerly practicing magic By application, anyone can believe in Jesus today and be saved through belief on the Lord.

Second Reading:

15. but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. 17 For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. 18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; (1 Peter 3:15-18)

Peter taught that even when Christians are undergoing persecution they still to be prepared to give testimony for the hope that they have through faith in the Lord Jesus (v. 15b). The way in which believers are to testify is with gentleness and reverence (v. 15c) such that those that are attacking their faith may learn from it such that they too come to faith in Jesus. Peter cautioned that it is better to suffer for doing good than to receive just punishment for doing wrong, such as breaking a civil law. We must remember the example of Jesus Who was put to death for our sins in order to bring us into a right position with God (v. 18).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint John and like last week the context is once again Jesus' parting words to His disciples during the Last Supper.

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Gospel Reading:

15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. 16 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. 18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 "After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. 20 "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. 21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." (John 14:15-21)

Several important points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how Jesus opened this section with the conditional phrase, "If you love me" (v. 15a). The word in the original translated "love" is a form of the word "agape" which refers to love that exists between Jesus and God. Jesus said rhetorically that if you love Him then you would follow His commandments. In the Jewish mind, the "commandments" would have referred to the whole of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments. However, later in John Jesus summed up the whole of the Law by the following statement. "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Jesus expressed the greatest love of all by giving His life for our sin. He said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). We are to express our keeping of the law by loving one another with Jesus sacrificial love as our example.

Second, when you examine the reading, you will see that the word "commandments" exists twice, once at the beginning and another time at the end. This "bounding" can be a clue to a central mean that exists between the two mentions of a concept of word. In the case, the central truth that emerged from between the two words is God's revelation of the sending of the Holy Spirit, something that happened fifty days from that first Easter Sunday on the Day of Pentecost. Sandwiched in the middle of this pronouncement is another of Jesus famous "I am" statements that indicated His unity with God the Father. Here we see Jesus testimony that not only is He one with the Father, but He is also one with the Holy Spirit.

Third, notice what Jesus said about the nonbelieving world. He said about the Holy Spirit that He "is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him" (v. 17). When Jesus did rise from the dead He only revealed Himself to a select group of people. Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the

gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). The unbelieving world has been blinded to the identity of the Person of the Holy Spirit through their inherent sin (Romans 3:23) along with the work of Satan and his agents.

How does the Gospel lesson today impact our lives? The sending of the Holy Spirit to live within us is God's fulfillment of the promise not to leave us as orphans (v. 18). The Person of the Holy Spirit is one of the ways that God works through us as we strive to strive to as Peter said in the second reading to be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). This "Spirit of Truth" (John 14:17) works to correct the world's false teachings about the way for people to make it to heaven when they die. He does this through living inside of believers and through the inspiration of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16). The Spirit also helps us to understand the Bible. Jesus said, "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come" (John 16:13).

Reflection Questions

1. Names in the Bible impart significant meaning to the person to whom they are assigned. List the names that Jesus revealed for the Person of the Holy Spirit. What are some qualities that can be ascertained from Jesus' use of these particular names?

2. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is critically important in the lives of believers. Read John 16:7-14. Summarize the ministries of the Holy Spirit disclosed by Jesus to His disciples in that text.

3. In verse 20 Jesus said, "In that day." To what Day what Jesus referring to? Could Jesus have had a dual fulfillment in mind when he used this term? If so, how would the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost have partially fulfilled this prophecy?

Keywords: Sixth Sunday of Easter, Lectionary 55

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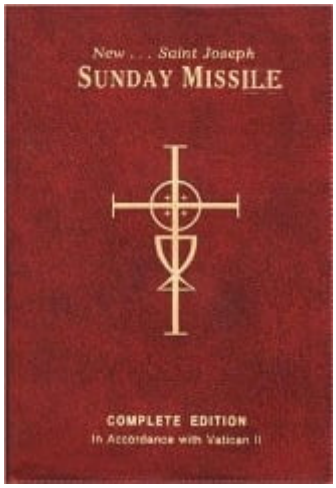
Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-10-2020



Mass study notes for May 10, 2020

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 05-03-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Peter's speech on the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to the rapidly growing Church. Then we move to the second reading and continue our study in the Book of First Peter. Finally, we close with the Gospel lesson from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Chapter 2 of the Book of Acts. The context is Peter's speech to a crowd of about 120 followers of Christ (Acts 1:15) on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after that first Easter Sunday. Just before Peter's speech, God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the followers which empowered them to speak in many known languages. Since this was unusual, some in the crowd that were gathered for the feast accused them of being drunk (Acts 2:13). In response to this allegation, Peter addressed the crowd to explain the reason for this unusual occurrence. Today's reading then jumps to verse 36 because these intermediate verses were covered last week. The opening word in verse 36 is the adverb "therefore." Without considering the context of the intermediate verses, a significant amount of information is left out that is relevant to this last section. Since we always need to understand what the "therefore" is there for, we will summarize the important points from the intermediate verses (15 – 35). First, read the opening of Peter's address in verse 14.

14 But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words."

Peter said in other words, "listen up." Next, he immediately corrected some of the people's false assumptions that the followers of Christ were drunk (v. 15). He said that what was happening was the fulfillment of the Prophet Joel's message (v.16) regarding God's pouring out of His Spirit on all mankind in the end times (Joel 2:28 – 32). In retrospect, we understand that what Peter meant was that this was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. After Peter quoted from this section of Joel, he presented testimony about how the people crucified "Jesus the Nazarene" and God raised Him from the dead (vv. 22 – 24). Next, Peter quoted from the Psalms to show how Jesus also fulfilled those prophetic writings by King David (vv.25 – 28). He noted that David died and his tomb is "with us to this day" (v.29), but Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that Someone would sit on David's throne (vv. 30 – 31). Saint Matthew went to great lengths to show that Jesus was of the line of David (Matthew 1:1-17). Additionally, the Prophet Isaiah stated explicitly that the Messiah would be of the line of David (Isaiah 9:6-7). Next Peter said, "This Jesus, God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (vv. 32-33). Peter closed this section of his address by again quoting from a Psalm, this time one that contained a conversation between God the Father and God the Son. "THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, 'SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET'" (vv. 34a – 35). To summarize, the sending of the Holy Spirit was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that signaled the start of the end times, after the Messiah came. Second, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies that He would be of the line of David. Finally, in the future Jesus the Lord will overcome all of His enemies, and be exalted above all of creation (1 Corinthians 15:27).

Now let's proceed with the reading.

First Reading:

36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ–this Jesus whom you crucified." 37 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:14, 36-41)

To paraphrase, Pete said some something like, "Therefore," take into account the authority of the prophetic Scriptures from which I previously quoted and how Jesus perfectly fulfilled them. God made Jesus both the Supreme Master ("Lord") and Messiah ("Christ," or "Anointed One," meaning Deliverer) (v. 36).

Peter's speech had a profound impact upon the crowd. "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart" and then asked Peter what they should do (v. 37). Peter told them to repent and be baptized, and then they too would receive the Holy Spirit (v. 38). Why do you think this happened, why were they "pierced to the heart"? Did Peter's speech have a profound impact upon **you** after you read it?

Here are some insights into possible reasons why Peter's speech had such a profound impact upon the Jewish audience who were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). First, the Jews were "people of the Book." These were the ones to whom God first revealed His plan of salvation. God, through His sovereign plan, had gathered the Jews together in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks to coincide with His outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the group of 120 followers of Jesus. To the Jews, the authority of God was vested in the Holy Books, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Once Peter explained with compelling evidence that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Holy Books, the Jews evidently recognized the overwhelming evidence in support of Jesus as God's Promised Messiah. A second possible reason why Peter's speech had a profound impact upon the Jews gathered for the Feast was the sheer magnanimity of what happened after the Holy Spirit of God had settled upon the group of believers. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. 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" (Acts 2:4, 6). Imagine the scene. Pilgrims from the various language groups all around the Roman Empire were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks. Next, the pilgrims heard this group of Galileans speaking, but each one of them heard and understood in their own language! This great miracle would have had a profound impact upon the people.

Because of this cascading series of events the pilgrims who heard Peter's message were convicted of their sin, they were "pierced to the heart" (v.37). A total of 3,000 Jews who heard Peter's speech repented and were baptized in one day.

We cannot underestimate the power that God unveiled that day in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit of God is the Person of God that lives inside of us, the One that empowers the Church. He is the Power

(Dunamis in Greek, similar to Dynamite in English) spoken of Jesus when He said that "the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). He is the One who started the Church that day in Jerusalem. He is God With Us, living in us, the Immanuel of Christ Whom God said "would never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6), the One that Jesus said would be in us (John 14:17).

As we leave the first reading and the events of that magical day in Jerusalem, let us endeavor to focus upon how God the Holy Spirit empowers and emboldens **us** to accomplish God's work in our lives. Let's also recognize how the Holy Spirit worked through Peter as he testified about how Jesus suffered and died for our sins, which will be revealed in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is another portion of Peter's experience of Jesus. Let's see how Peter used the authority of the Old Testament to affirm his argument about how Jesus Christ suffered as a perfect Man for us.

Second Reading:

20 For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. 21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, 22 WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:20-25)

The people were struggling with various forms of persecution for their faith, as well as finding their identity in Jesus Christ. They may have asked something like, "Why, if I am a Christian, do I have to suffer persecution, when all I have done is to believe the truth of God and follow His commandments?" The answer, according to the Holy Spirit, as recorded by Peter, is that we as

believers are called by God to suffer (v.21) with Jesus as our example on how we are to go about it. "[W]hile being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (v.23). Peter said that Jesus died for our sins, "so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (v. 24). It was through Jesus death on the cross that He freed us from the power of sin (Romans 8:2). We suffer for a wide variety of reasons, one of which is to accomplish the purposes of God (v.20d).

Have you developed your own personal "theology of suffering?" Have you rationalized, in light of the Scriptures, why bad things happen to "good" (Romans 3:23) people? These are good things to wrestle with even before hard times fall upon us. One way that suffering benefits us is that it helps us to identify ourselves with Christ Who suffered for us. There is a fellowship or bond that comes from suffering with someone. God invites us into a bond with Christ as we go through hard times and persecution.

I became friends with a man named Ron Christy several years ago just before he was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Ron provided a powerful story about how a Christian can suffer while still providing a strong testimony for the Lord. You can read Ron's testimony online at the following link: https://www.christiansforchrist.org/articles/testimonies/ron-christy-my-walk-of-faith-with-als

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Peter's words about returning to the "Shepherd and Guardian of our souls" sets the perfect stage for the Gospel lesson from John Chapter 10. The context of His message is just after He healed a blind man and afterwards confronted the Pharisees (John 9). This section of Scripture is profound in that throughout the Chapter Jesus uses a metaphor of Himself as the Shepherd and the Door, with us as the sheep. Other characters come into play in the lesson including a gatekeeper, robbers, thieves, and strangers. As you read, think about the contemporary application of these characters as Jesus' illustration unfolds. In the world today, who are the robbers, thieves, and strangers to whom Jesus was pointing?

Gospel Reading:

1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs

up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them. 7 So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:1-10)

Jesus' story alluded to Ezekiel 34, where God condemned the shepherds of Israel, meaning the spiritual leaders (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Ezekiel announced God's strong judgment on the kings, priests, and prophets who ruled before the exile of the Jews to Babylon. God said, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:10). It's not coincidental that Jesus' message came just after He told a group of Pharisees that they were spiritually blind (John 9:41). It's evident that Jesus message was pointed squarely at the Pharisees, a group of spiritual "lay ministers" (shepherds) of Israel.

A wealth of rich points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how as the story unfolded that Jesus was the Shepherd (v. 2), then in verse 7 he became the "door of the sheep" which led to the pasture (v. 9d). In the first century, the shepherds sometimes slept in the gate in order to protect their sheep. Anyone or anything that wanted to come into the sheepfold would have to enter through the gate and thereby come past the shepherd. By application, Jesus is saying that the only way to God is through Him. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Faith in Jesus is the only means provided by God for a person to cross into Jesus' fold and be saved (v. 9).

Second, if you have ever visited the areas around Jerusalem you will notice that the shepherds in the region stand at various positions around the sheepfold and summon the animals with their own unique calls. The application of this principle is that Jesus calls His people to God's Kingdom. Jesus went even further than a communal call to His sheep, He said, "he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (v. 3c). Jesus knows each one of us, his precious sheep. Later, beyond the range of today's reading, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me" (John 10:14). This means that Jesus desires a personal relationship with each of us.

Third, notice Jesus' "I am" statement in verse 7, which is the third of this type of statement in John's Gospel (in the English translation, in the Greek text this is the 13'th). This phrase was something that the First Century Jews would have recognized as a strong statement of divinity. In Jesus' earlier use of this phrase in John's Gospel He said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:35). In today's reading Jesus said, "I am the door" (v. 9a). Jesus is our source of life, our spiritual sustenance. He is the Light of truth from God, the Light that leads us to the single door to obtain eternal life, the only way to God.

Fourth, Jesus is our protector from the spiritual thieves, strangers, and wild animals. Though Jesus directed His message to the Pharisees, these ungodly forces are alive and well in the present day. All one has to do is click through the television dial on any given day to find spiritual charlatans peddling their wares all across the airwaves. False spiritual cults abound, as do global religious movements that enthrone the false god of the moon and objects in temples. Peter said about the false teachers, "But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed" (2 Peter 2:12). Though we live in a fallen age where spiritual darkness is present across the world, we are called as the ones that God knows by name to continue to plead with the lost and dying generation to repent of their sins and be baptized, trusting only in the Lord Jesus for spiritual life.

Some years ago, I completed a study of the Book of Genesis and made an interesting observation about God's gathering of the animals into the ark. The Bible says, "So they went into the ark to Noah, by twos of all flesh in which was the breath of life" (Genesis 7:15). The insight that I had was that many of the people in that region that had either watched, or possibly even been involved in the building of the ark, had to have seen the animals entering two by two into the ark. Perhaps the people on the outside were saying something like, "There they go, two by two into the ark, just like Preacher Noah had said they would." Noah, a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5) must have suffered terribly knowing all the people that he ministered to perished, except for his small family. The story went on, "Those that entered, male and female of all flesh, entered as God had commanded him; and the LORD closed it behind him" (v. 16). In retrospect, it was easy for them to be convinced of Noah's prophecy regarding the Great Flood once the door of the ark was sealed shut by God and the deluge began. Noah would have allowed anyone entrance to the ark, right up until the time the flood began. Instead of just eight people being saved (1 Peter 3:20), the Scripture **could** have read something like this:

"On the very same day Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with them, entered the ark" (Genesis 7:13).

Then, as just before God sealed the door of the ark shut, a man named John came running up the ramp into the ark (my words added).

"[W]hen the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water" (1 Peter 3:20).

And a man named John (my words added).

The animals are walking two by two into the proverbial ark right now. God is gathering His people through their faith in the Jesus, who was foreshadowed in the ark. In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus gathered and called His people by name into the pen where He protected them and fed them. Jesus is the ark, He is our only means of escaping the flood of judgment that will come upon the unsaved world because of their sin. Someday God will once again seal up the "ark," forbidding anyone else to cross from death into life. In the parable of the ten virgins Jesus said, "And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut" (Matthew 25:10). John said in Revelation, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Revelation 21:8).

Our first response is to make sure that we have put our trust in Jesus for salvation. Have you resolve this in your own heart, that when you give an account for your life you can honestly say you trusted in Jesus, not your own good works? Our next response is to warn the world of the coming judgment and point them to the only possible means of salvation, repentance of their sin and faith in Jesus Christ. 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). Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. What does it look like in your life to shine your light in a dark world to those "outside the ark"? What is one concrete step that you could begin praying about and take in the upcoming weeks to reach one person for Jesus?

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2. Although we asked you to identify the contemporary roles of the various bad actors in the Gospel lesson the focus wasn't upon the evil actors but upon Jesus as the only means to reach God. In light of what you learned, what, or who, are the evil actors that are influencing your life in terms of walking with God, and how does Jesus protect and deliver you from them?

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