Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-24-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. We open with the first reading from Isaiah 49 in which we study one of the "Servant Songs" of God. Then we learn from Saint Paul's message to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch and end with the reading from Luke heralding the birth of John the Baptist.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 49 covering the second of the Servant Songs in which God the Father addressed the Nation of Israel as a personification of His Servant, and secondly, He spoke to His Son the Messiah. The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long-awaited Messiah. As you read, take note of the purposes of the two servants mentioned, the servant Israel and the Messiah Servant whom we know as Jesus.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 49:1-6 NAS95 1 Listen to Me, O islands, And pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; From the body of My mother He named Me. 2 He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. 3 He said to Me, "You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory." 4 But I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD, And My reward with My God." 5 And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His*

> *Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength), 6 He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

The context of the passage was God's promises for the complete restoration of Israel given to the Nation just prior to the judgement of the Northern Kingdom. The chapter opens with the restatement of both the purposes of the Prophet Isaiah as well as Israel. God said about Isaiah that "He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver" (v. 2). Isaiah was God's chosen instrument to bring the message of His judgment and promise of future restoration to Israel. Next God stated His purpose for the Nation. Isaiah said, "He said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory'" (v. 3). Isaiah was chosen to be God's messenger to the Jews, and the Jews were chosen to bear this message of salvation to the world. These chosen people were to be a "called out" group, set apart and established by God as salt and light to the surrounding nations. Isaiah continued, "And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength)" (v. 5). The reading concludes with God's promise to restore the entire nation of Israel such as to reach the entire earth with the good news of God's salvation (v. 6).

Now let's look at the servant themes in the reading where we see the purpose of God's servants. The first purpose of the servants was to restore the Jews to God. The LORD said to His Servant Son that He "formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him" (v.5b-ff). Though Israel was the God's servant (v.3 "My Servant Israel"), this Servant Son was born with the express purpose of restoring the people of God to true communion with Him. Jesus said in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37). The second purpose of the servants was to be a light to the Gentiles so that "My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v.6d). The mechanism through which the restoration came wasn't through Israel, but through Jesus. The Christian Church has temporarily usurped the role of Israel as a light to the nations, a condition which will be restored during the Great Tribulation. Jesus said to His disciples, "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" (Matthew 28:19-20b).

By means of application, the Christian Church is yet the third servant of God. Despite the temporary unbelief of the Jews, Israel's disobedience was used by God to bring light to the Gentiles through the ministry of this third servant, the Church of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul said that, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25c). The Church hasn't replaced Israel, because once God has completed his divine plan through the refining fire of the tribulation period all of Israel will be obedient to Him. Paul said, "[A]nd so all Israel will be

saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB" (Romans 11:26).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Acts 13 is Paul's Sabbath day speech to the Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. He was accompanied by Barnabas, while Saint John had just left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Paul's address to them began in verse 17 during which he reminded them of their history and how God had answered their call for a king by giving them Saul (v. 21).

Second Reading:

> *Acts 13:22-26 NAS95 22 "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' 23 From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24 after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' 26 Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent."*

Paul told the Jews in the synagogue about God had raised up the Messiah from the line of King David (v. 23). He then moved further forward in history to tell them about how God had raised up the prophet John (the Baptist) who pointed the way towards the Messiah (v. 25). Finally, he told them about how this message of salvation through the Messiah was for them, "sons of Abraham's family" (v. 26a).

Verse 22 says that King David was a man after God's own heart. What does it mean to be a person after God's own heart like David? First, people seeking to be people of God are empowered through His Holy Spirit Who indwells everyone that has been born from above (John 3:3). We learn from 1 Samuel that when King David was ordained by God "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:13b). Second, we people walking with God must submit themselves to the Lord by being obedient to Him (James 4:7). One of the main stumbling stones that many have in submitting to God is pride. Saint Peter said, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5). Finally, people walking with God must develop a love for the Word of God. King David said the following about this in the Book of Psalms. "I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalms 119:47-48).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from the opening of Luke and provides the details of the birth of John the Baptist through his parents Zacharias the priest and Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary. Zacharias was unable to speak up until the birth because he didn't believe the Angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19 – 20).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 1:57-66, 80 NAS95 57 Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. 59 And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. 60 But his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John." 61 And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name." 62 And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. 63 And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all astonished. 64 And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. 65 Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, "What then will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.*
>
> *80 And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel.*

This John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, the one spoken of Paul in the second reading whose purpose was to announce the coming Messiah Jesus. His birth was similar to the miraculous birth of Isaac to Abram and Sarai in the Old Testament because Elizabeth was both barren and old (Luke 1:7). The miracle of John's birth to his elderly parents continued after his birth when his father was able to speak again (v. 64). John the Baptist was a herald of God's plan of salvation in a similar way as Isaiah was whom we read about in the first reading. We know that Jesus said that John was the greatest man that ever lived (Matthew 11:11). John the Baptist was yet another of the prophets sent by God to draw people to Himself through his announcement of the Messiah Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we discussed the purpose of God's servants. What about us, what has God raised us up to be watching for? What are the purposes that God has placed upon *our* hearts as servants of the Lord? Consider taking the following action. Pray right now for God to reveal one or two things, write them down, and reflect upon them this week.

2. Frequently when someone brings up King David our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality this is similar to what the Pharisees did

to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing – though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before.

A. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee overlooking the heart and focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

B. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others.

C. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-17-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with Ezekiel 17: 22-24. The prophet uses a metaphor to show how God sets up kings and takes them down and will eventually establish a King who will reign over all. Then we move to St. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, encouraging

the use of our earthly bodies for eternal purposes. Finally we conclude with St. Mark 4: 26-34, as Jesus uses parables to teach about the kingdom of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

When an F5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, on May 22, 2011, 158 people died and countless others were injured. Tornado warnings had been issued and the sirens activated, but many did not seek shelter soon enough. One study found that only 10 percent of the population respond immediately when a tornado warning is given. The others respond with what the researcher called, "denial." * Lives are lost when people don't believe and heed the warnings.

Ezekiel was a prophet of God sent out to warn God's people of impending destruction. God had always been their shelter in a time of storm, but they had strayed far from Him. If they didn't turn back to Him destruction would surely overtake them. Ezekiel and many of the other prophets were sent to sound the alarm, but sadly, many did not heed the prophets' warning.

The people of God were composed of twelve tribes descended from Abraham's grandson Jacob, (renamed Israel in Genesis 35:10). These descendants and the land God gave them for a home were called Israel. From them, the Messiah Jesus would come, and through the salvation He would bring, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Despite their privileged position in God's plan for the nations, Israel rebelled against God and went after the false gods of the surrounding nations. They forgot the Lord's commands and worshiped idols. This was the fate of King Solomon when he ruled in Israel after his father David's reign. At first, he followed God, and God gave him great wisdom to rule justly. But when Solomon married foreign women, he began to follow after their gods. Because of his idolatry, God would take ten of the tribes from his rule and leave his posterity the tribes of Benjamin and Judah only. The ten tribes became known as the Northern Kingdom and were called Israel. The remaining two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom and were called Judah. It was to Judah that God sent Ezekiel with His warnings.

God had already sent an invading army from Babylon to take Judah into captivity. Ezekiel was with the first wave of captives taken to Babylon. Some of God's people, however, still remained in Jerusalem, Judah's capital. If they didn't repent and turn back to God, they would face a similar fate as their brothers. They ignored the warning, and instead of seeking God, they sought an alliance with Egypt. That failed, and Babylon conquered Jerusalem taking most of the people who resided there into captivity.

First Reading:

> ***Ezekiel 17:22-24 NAS95 22 Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23 "On the high mountain***

> ***of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. 24 "All the trees of the field will know that I am the LORD; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will perform it."***

In the First Reading, Ezekiel uses trees as a metaphor for rulers God sets up and takes down. When kings abandoned God and led the people far away from Him, God sent prophets like Ezekiel to call them back to God and warn them of impending destruction. When the king and his people persisted in their rebellion, God sent conquerors to come and take them captive.

Ezekiel looked forward to the time when God will set up another king. God will take a twig from the lofty top of the cedar and plant it on the mountain of Israel, and it will bear fruit and birds of all kinds will come and prosper there. This tree is a reference to Jesus who will be established in Israel and will bring salvation to all who come to Him. And someday He will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a heavenly kingdom that has no end.

Another prophet sounds the warning for us. St. John tells us:

> *16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (Gospel of St. John 3: 16-18)*

Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Those that don't, stand judged already.

* http://www.mprnews.org/story/2012/05/09/storm-ready-human-reaction#gallery accessed 5/18/15

Introduction to the Second Reading:

1 and 2 Corinthians were written by St. Paul the Apostle to the church in Corinth. There were sin issues in the church, and Paul had addressed them frankly in 1 Corinthians. Now in his second letter, he wanted to reassure the Corinthians that he did this, not out of anger, but out of love. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul encourages the Corinthian church to forgive and restore the one who had caused the problems. He goes on to discuss practical matters of Christian living such as financial giving and caution regarding relationships with unbelievers. But often his thoughts turn from earthly matters to eternal blessings.

In the proclamation of the gospel, St. Paul had undergone extreme persecution which he recounts in 2 Corinthians 4. He testified, *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."* Encouragement came from knowing that these "light troubles," as he called them, were producing eternal results—people

were hearing about and believing in Jesus. His focus was not on the temporary suffering but on eternal rewards. He continued this focus in chapter 5.

Second Reading:

> ***2 Corinthians 5:6-10 NAS95 6 Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord– 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight– 8 we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9 Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.***

In the first five verses, St. Paul compares our bodies with an earthly tent. Tents are fragile and temporary and subject to destruction. So are our earthly bodies. While we are in this "tent" we groan and are burdened, Paul tells us. We long for a heavenly body, which is like an eternal house not a fragile tent.

In this reading (v. 6-10), Paul acknowledges that it would be much better to be away from this body and home with the Lord in heaven. But until then, Paul tells us to do what is pleasing to the Lord. God has ministry for us to do, and it would be pointless to waste this time by wishing we were in heaven. But on the other hand, knowing that we are going to heaven someday will give us courage and perseverance when we face persecution and hardship in this life.

In addition, St. Paul reminds us we will someday have to give an account to Christ for what we have done in this life as Christians. Did we serve Him well? Did we tell others about Christ? Will He someday be able to say to you and me, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*"? He will if we faithfully use these earthly bodies to accomplish his eternal purposes.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Wherever Jesus went, a crowd of the curious gathered. He often spoke to them in parables. A parable is a simple, everyday story that represents a spiritual truth or moral principle. It usually compares a spiritual concept with an earthly object or event.

Gospel Reading:

> ***Mark 4:26-34 NAS95 26 And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; 27 and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows–how, he himself does not know. 28 The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. 29 But when***

> ***the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." 30 And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, 32 yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEST UNDER ITS SHADE." 33 With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; 34 and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.***

In the Gospel Reading, two parables are given. The first one begins, "*The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil."* Stories like these are often told to illustrate or illuminate a truth. But Jesus spoke in parables not to clarify the truth but to obscure it. It was a judgment on those whose hearts were hard. To the unbelieving, the parables were incomprehensible riddles, but to those who wanted to understand the truth, Jesus would give them understanding. He said to His disciples and His true followers, "*To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, [12] so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand….*"*

In the first parable, the kingdom of God is compared to a man who plants seeds. While he goes about his daily routine and without any further help from the man, the seed sprouts and matures. So it is with us. We plant the seed of the gospel in people's hearts when we teach or preach or proclaim the truth of the Bible to our friends, neighbors, and relatives. Then God causes the implanted truth to take root and grow. A mature Christian is the result.

The second parable says that the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed which grows into a large plant with branches capable of providing shade for birds of the air. The church was small in the beginning–just a little band of disciples. But when those men were empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the Gospel to the whole world, the church grew rapidly. Many have found comfort and salvation there. If we plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts, God will cause that seed to spout and the church to flourish.

*Information gleaned from a sermon by John MacArthur accessed 5/20/15.
http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-464/the-purpose-for-parables

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Reflection Questions

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1. What would you need to do differently in order to live your life for eternal purposes? List two areas in which you will write down on a card or in your personal journal.

2. If we plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts, God will cause it to grow. What are some ways you can plant more "seeds" this week? Give at least two ways in which this could be done.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-10-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will learn about the fall of man and God's plan to redeem His fallen creation. In the second reading we will see how God provides us with a calling to examine and understand the need to have an eternal perspective. Finally, we will see a continuation of the divine / demonic battle in the Gospel lesson that runs throughout each of the three readings.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading from Genesis records the event known in biblical history as the "fall of man" during which humankind went from a state of innocence and walking with God to a state of sin and separation from God. Today's reading records not only the Fall but also the first time that God revealed His plan for the redemption of humanity. This "protoevangelium" or first Gospel isn't perhaps evident from a cursory reading of verse 15 as we will see below. The context is just after the fall itself when the woman was deceived by the serpent, took of the forbidden fruit, ate it, gave it to the first man to eat, and the man then willingly ate of it (Genesis 3:1-6). Satan, in the form of a serpent, deceived the woman by telling her that eating of the fruit would make her like God, possessing the knowledge of good and evil. This was partially true, as the woman already had the knowledge of good by walking with God in perfect fellowship prior to the fall. Second, by eating of the forbidden fruit she would then obtain the knowledge of evil. However, we know that Satan's offer to become like God knowing good and evil was false because God cannot know evil or be the source of it (James 1:13). Immediately after the Fall the first action that man and woman took was to create clothing to hide their shame and to hide themselves from God (Genesis 3:7-8). Again, note that the woman was deceived by the serpent, but that man willingly sinned.

In my Bible I have a small illustration drawn in the margin next to these verses. The image is that of a stick figure person which a very large head trying to hide behind one very skinny tree. The image came to my mind through the Peanuts comic character of Charlie Brown by Charles Schulz. Image Charlie Brown hiding behind his precious little, scrawny Christmas tree while trying to escape the prying eyes of Lucy. This is the scene that unfolds as God addresses the first couple in today's reading.

First Reading:

> *Genesis 3:9-15 NAS95 9 Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." 11 And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you will go, And dust you will eat All the days of your life; 15 And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."*

The reading opens with God Who knows all, seeking Adam and Eve in their hiding place. Here, God makes the first move towards forgiveness by asking them to come clean and confess their sin. The man was the first to answer and his first response was to blame the woman. The woman then answered and blamed the serpent. God's response was to first pronounce a curse upon the serpent Satan, and his line (the demons who followed him). God's curse placed the line of Satan at odds with the line of the woman, her seed (v. 14f). God told them that in addition to the enmity between

humanity Satan, that One would (by implication) would inflict a fatal wound to the head of Satan (bruise your head, v. 15c), while He would only suffer a "bruise on the heal" (v. 15d). Reading verse 15 again we see, "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." What are the implications of this divine war raged by Satan against us? These are many, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual [forces] of wickedness in the heavenly [places.]" (Ephesians 6:12).

As humans subject to the fall we "all fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Like Adam and Eve, we are beset by guilt and shame as a result of our sin. The good news is the Gospel, the meaning of that word. Jesus came to pay the penalty owed to God for our sins. God sent Jesus into the world to redeem the world. Paul said, "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). God made the first move after **our** sin, as we saw that He did for the first man and woman in the reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Second Corinthians. Saint Paul is the author of the this Letter written to the worldly Corinthians, perhaps people much like ourselves in some sense. This church was dealing with many issues related to having a worldly perspective. The culture of Corinth is likened to present-day Las Vegas, with a bit of Wall Street thrown in. While people came to believe in Jesus as Savior, it was a long process for them to orient their lives around His teaching and value system. One of the values that Paul communicated to them in this letter was the need to have an eternal perspective.

Second Reading:

> *2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1 NAS95 13 But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe, therefore we also speak, 14 knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. 15 For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. 16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 1 For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

An eternal perspective provides a foundational orientation to one's life and circumstances that is grounded in faith. In the previous verses, Paul talks about persecution and the obvious weaknesses of the human condition. We are finite human beings, having the treasure of who Christ is "in jars of

clay." But, this was actually not an impediment, for God works through what is weak in order to show His surpassing greatness through us. We do not get glory, but God does. Paul continues in this vein, highlighting the supremacy of faith in Christ as the most important orienting foundation in a believer's life.

This faith is what gave Paul, and therefore by extension all believers, hope that there is more to this life than what can be seen. It was his belief in Christ's resurrection power that allowed Paul to see beyond the overwhelming circumstances of his present sufferings. Paul knew that this life was not all there is—and that one day those who have put their trust in Christ would be raised to eternal life, just as Christ was raised from the dead after his death and burial. This faith is a grace given to humankind by God, and was spreading to more and more people until it has reached to even us today. Because of this grace and faith, Paul did not lose heart in the midst of his own challenging circumstances. He acknowledged that thought the outer body was decaying and in constant danger of being destroyed, this world was not all that he was living for.

In the midst of unchosen suffering, God can be up to something very unique and strategic in the believer's life. If we allow it, the suffering can help us grow more and more detached from feeling like this world is our home, which allows us to resist the subtle temptation of being squeezed into its mold. Paul said that these light and momentary trials (see 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 for a list of what he considered "light and momentary" trials) were actually producing something unseen in his life. He expounds on this later in the letter in 2 Corinthians 12, where he says that his suffering was doing the good work of keeping him humble and dependent on Jesus. He was finding that Christ's strength was being perfected in his weakness. The world says that weakness is terminal, but God says that weakness, when turned over to Him, can actually produce a weightier thing than all of the world's superficial riches. There is a glory that God is refining in us, attaching us more deeply to Himself and bringing us more closely back to His original design of being made in and reflecting His image in the world.

This eternal perspective does not come naturally. Paul encourages his readers to "fix our eyes" on what is unseen—which implies intentionality and purposefulness. This type of perspective will not come by osmosis, in fact we'll have to fight against the natural pull of gravity that keeps our gaze on things that we can see. Instead, he encourages the saints in Corinth to develop eyes of faith, evaluating life's circumstances on God's eternal value system.

If we think that this life is all there is, we will live by one of many inferior and purposeless mottos. A popular one is what we've seen on bumper stickers: "He who dies with the most toys wins." I've seen the answer to this with another bumper sticker that says, "He who dies with the most toys, still dies." The finite nature of human existence has kept philosophers actively postulating what the meaning of life could be. Paul definitively answers this in his letter, clarifying that the meaning of life on earth is to find eternal life in Christ, so that our sins can be forgiven and we can live for eternity with the Father. This is the eternal glory that outweighs all other pursuits. May this be the orienting priority of our own lives, which then encourages God's grace to reach more and more people as they see our "peculiar" lives founded on eternal principles.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark. The context is Jesus' early ministry of healing the sick and demon possessed. Jesus' power over the Satanic spirits was displayed in its full power. "And whenever the unclean spirits beheld Him, they would fall down before Him and cry out, saying, "You are the Son of God!" (Mark 3:11).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 3:20-35 NAS95 20 And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. 21 When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses." 22 The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." 23 And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! 27 But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. 28 Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — 30 because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" 31 Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. 32 A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." 33 Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" 34 Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."*

The scribes were accusing Jesus of casting out demons through the power of Satan, "the ruler of the demons" (v. 22). Jesus explained to them that this wasn't logical, that "a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand" (v. 24a), reminiscent of President Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech. Jesus, at least at this early point in his ministry, reasoned with the scribes and further explained to them that no, He was not casting out demons through the power of Satan by means of a parable. In this parable Jesus expressed how God was all powerful and reigned over the demons and their leader Satan. Next, Jesus in his willingness to see the scribes convicted of their sin such that they would repent, explained the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. This sin is not one of attributing the power of God to Satan, although that is an implication, but is rather the conscious and ongoing sin of rejection of the Holy Spirit of God in calling people to repent of their sins and turn to the only solution offered by God: faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus revealed in John chapter 8 how the scribes committed this great sin when He told them that they "were of [their] father the devil," and that "[they" to do the desires of [their] father" (John 8:44). In the closing of the reading, Jesus' mother and kin came to Him while he was "working" such that they stood outside and others told him that they were seeking Him (v. 32). Jesus' answer to them wasn't disrespectful, but rather was a message

sent to them perhaps reminding them of the urgency of His work and the need to focus upon the spiritual battles on His hands. Remember that Jesus perfectly completed the Law, and as such was bound to honor His mother (Exodus 20:12).

Today's Gospel reading reminds us of the spiritual war that is raging against all believers and how God has won the victory for us through Jesus. We can rest assured that as believers we can never commit the unpardonable sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, as this is on ongoing, conscious rejection of Jesus as the only means of salvation. Jesus reminds us in the reading of the urgency of spreading this message, even when it means the short-term reprioritizing of certain pressing issues, such as in Jesus case putting off an inquisitive and concerned family. We see in all three readings how God desires to give us an eternal perspective. He has won the battle for us and what we need to do is to receive His power through faith in His Son Jesus.

The spiritual battle is real, whether or not we sense or truly believe it. I remember back when I was renting a nice little lakefront home from an old lady who at first seemed very pleasant. But as our relationship continued I began to sense a spiritual darkness in her that came about through her coming to know things about me that she had absolutely no way of figuring out on her own. I came to understand that the same demonic forces that had been watching me during my life had in some way been able to provide her with deep seated information that they knew would be harmful to me. This landlord had developed a way of bringing this information to me at the worst possible times. It is highly likely that the same demons that controlled her would one day be released after her death, and go about seeking others to torment These are very likely the spirits that the world knows as "ghosts." Paul said that we are to "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Have you ever noticed that you never hear about the ghost of a kind, loving Christian woman who lived on the old house on the corner? Rather, aren't ghost stories made up by unkind, evil people who lash out at people who try to turn them towards the good?

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw the use of the term "protoevangelium" or first Gospel. Looking back on your life, when was the first time that you heard the Gospel and understood God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? How does knowing that God provided a way help you to deal with your own guilt and shame that you encounter in your daily life?

2. Having an eternal perspective does not come naturally. What are some things about God (attributes) that you have learned today that will help you to strengthen such a godly mindset?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-03-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the Old Testament book of Exodus and learn about the giving of God's Law and the people's response to it. Then we move to Hebrews in the New Testament, where Jesus is shown to be our high priest, fulfilling the role pictured in the Old Testament offering of sacrificial blood to cover sin. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel of Mark where we learn about the Last Supper. Here Jesus clearly spoke of the significance of Communion, the offering of His body and blood. As you study all three, look for a common theme among them.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). As the name implies, it records the story of Israel's deliverance after 400 years of slavery in Egypt and the long journey of forty years to the Promised Land. After the Exodus from Egypt and during the long journey through the wilderness, God appeared to Moses on Sinai Mountain and delivered to him the Law. The summary of it, the Ten Commandments, is in chapter 20, and the next several chapters explain more fully the covenant God is making with His people. Laws and regulations relating to worship, offerings, sacrifices, and the building of a tabernacle for His dwelling place are given in great detail.

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First Reading:

> *Exodus 24:3-8 NAS95 3 Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!" 4 Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. 6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" 8 So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

We have read now about the people's response to the giving of God's Law. When Moses came down from the mountain and revealed the Law the people twice agreed to obey the Law completely, first in verse 3 and again in verse 7. After hearing the people's response to the Law, Moses wrote down the words that God had told him (v. 4). Then, he built an altar and made the sacrifices that God had commanded, including the sprinkling of blood on the altar. The blood from the sacrificial animals represented the covenant, in a similar way as we remember the shedding of the once for all sacrificial Lamb Jesus through celebration of communion. This was the beginning of many years of sacrificial offerings which prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of blood to be made by the Messiah Jesus many centuries later. When Moses read from the "book of the covenant" that he had written down (v. 4a), the people they once again vowed to obey the Law.

We know how all of this turned out. Although the people agreed to obey the Law, they very soon broke away from strict observance of it to the extent that God prevented any of them except Joshua and Caleb from entering the Promised Land. In subsequent generations the people fell into cycles of sin, punishment from God, and return to following His Law. At the end of the Old Testament when the voice of the prophets fell silent, the people began increasingly seeking the coming Messiah. Obedience to the Law became codified by the scribes and Pharisees into the Jewish religion through which the doers of this "law" felt justified.

As Christians we too are called to obey God's Law but through a new relationship granted to us through the New Covenant initiated by Jesus' death and resurrection. Like the Jews in the reading, we agree that we want to obey God. However, unlike those in the reading, our ability to obey God's teaching is granted through the new heart given to us from above (John 3:3). Although obedience ought to be our response when we hear God's Word, God knows that we will continue to struggle with sin (Romans 3:23). Through our relationship with Jesus Christ was have an Advocate, Jesus Christ, Who intercedes on our behalf with our Father God. Saint John said, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we

keep His commandments" (1 John 2:1-3). We should not look back at the Jews and think that we would do any better than they do. Instead, we have a unique empowerment through God's Holy Spirit living within us that they didn't have. This should provide us with a sense of even greater responsibility since to whom much is given, much is demanded (Luke 12:48).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the First reading we saw how God's covenant was display to His people Israel through the observance of the sacrificial practices in the Law. In this passage from Hebrews we read of a "New Covenant." Although the old covenant was sealed with through the repetitious offering of the blood of sacrificial animals, the New Covenant was sealed with one single offering of the blood of Jesus. In the reading we will see how Jesus is shown as the High Priest Who offers this single, acceptable sacrifice (His death burial, and resurrection) to atone for our sin.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 9:11-15 NAS95 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*

The Old Testament priests had to repeat the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the Temple, which were mere symbols of the dwelling place of God, for "the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands" (Acts 7:48). But Jesus entered into "the greater and more perfect tabernacle"—into the very presence of God—to present the sufficient sacrifice of His blood. So, not only has Jesus paid the price for our sin, He has also become the one mediator between man and God (1 Timothy 2:5). Therefore, as Christians we can rejoice that through the work of Jesus on our behalf, we have the "promise of the eternal inheritance," ever to be with Jesus in heaven.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

All three of the readings today made mention of a covenant. In the first reading from Exodus it was God's covenant with man that required the keeping of the Law, including blood sacrifices as a picture of cleansing. In the second reading from Hebrews the writer reminded us of a New Covenant that God offers to people through the sacrifice of Christ's blood that satisfied God's demands for justice. Finally, as we look at today's Gospel reading, we have the account of the Last Supper with its deep, significant teaching of essential truth. In the reading we will see Jesus celebrate His last

Passover meal with the twelve disciples.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 14:12-26 NAS95 12 On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?" 13 And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; 14 and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' 15 "And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there." 16 The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover. 17 When it was evening He came with the twelve. 18 As they were reclining at the table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me–one who is eating with Me." 19 They began to be grieved and to say to Him one by one, "Surely not I?" 20 And He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who dips with Me in the bowl. 21 For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." 22 While they were eating, He took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is My body." 23 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 And He said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Jesus had evidently conferred with the person whom the disciples met regarding the place with they were going to prepare the Passover meal. However, only Jesus could have known that at the instant when they went into the city they would meet this certain man carrying a pitcher (v. 13). The disciples then prepared the meal perhaps not understanding the full significance as we do with the benefit of hindsight. The Passover supper provided clear illustrations of God's grace and mercy to sinful men. First, it pointed back to the delivery of Israel from Egypt. When the angel of death fell upon the Egyptian households, their firstborn children died. But the Jewish children survived because the families had sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial lamb (representative of Jesus, the Lamb of God) on their doorposts. The celebration of Passover for the Jews is a vivid reminder of deliverance by blood. Now, on this special night in Jerusalem Jesus used object lessons to demonstrate that it was essential to identify by faith in His blood and body in order to receive the offered gift of salvation and a personal relationship with God. In stark contrast to this gracious offer, Jesus points out that one of the Twelve, who had walked and worked with Him, would betray Him. In fact, before the night was over, all of the disciples would fail the Master (however eleven repented and returned to Him).

As we look back at Jesus' Last Supper, we recognize the great importance of our communing with Jesus through the celebration of the communion meal. Communion helps us to recognize how our Savior willingly offered His body and blood as the supreme sacrifice once and for all. Although we

take communion many times, each time we look back to the single sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf forever. Unlike the priests in the Old Testament who had to offer repeatedly the same sacrifices which never took away their sin (Hebrews 10:11), when we celebrate communion we recognize how our Great High Priest Jesus sat down at the right hand of God after offering Himself once, taking away our sins forever (Hebrews 10:12). Communion provides a time for us to reflect upon our unique relationship with God through the New Covenant, one in which we no longer have to rely upon the Old Testament priests offering sacrifice on our behalf, as we saw in the first and second readings today.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading we saw some powerful statements about both the identity and the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ towards believers. Study the text of this reading again and answer the questions that follow.

> *Hebrews 9:11-15 NAS95 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*

A. The author of Hebrews described how Jesus as the eternal High Priest entered not into the tabernacle built by Moses but into a far different place. Describe the attributes of the "more perfect tabernacle" (v. 11) into which Jesus entered. In what ways is this tabernacle different from the one built by Moses?

B. Verse 15 begins with the phrase, "For this reason." For what reason is the author or Hebrews referring?

2. In the Gospel lesson we read about Jesus' last supper with His disciples and His call to the disciples to reflect upon whether they would be the one who betrayed Him (v. 18). How does what you learned today about the eternal nature of the ministry of Jesus as our highly priestly King enable you to better answer a question about your own ability to take a stand for our Lord?

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Anna: Deliverance from Marijuana



Marijuana Opens the Gate to Demonic Realm. Jesus Saved Me Testimony

As a believer in Christ, I would like others to experience His the most amazing love. If God could forgive me and save me, He can do it for anyone.

My Life Before Christ

I was born into a non-Christian family. My parents worked hard to give me a good life. At the age of 14 I started to rebel. I started to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol. I was sure my looks was everything I had. I stole my mother's gold jewelry. I was having sex with people who didn't care about me. I was young and naive, I didn't have any experience and right guidance to show me that I was doing bad things. In college, I was mostly focused on looking good and partying. My life was filled with sadness.

How I Came To Know Jesus Christ Personally

In my early twenties I started to smoke weed a lot. I became interested in channeling spirits, spirit mediums, 3rd eye opening, chakra cleansing, one love consciousness, basically New Age movement. Those things are very dangerous. Combined with drugs can open a person up to spiritual/demonic attack. Drugs create weaknesses in the person's mind, allowing demons to enter. I knew I was doing something wrong smoking all that marijuana since my mother begged me not to. I didn't care, I kept smoking and talking to spirits.

Once I took a hit of weed I found myself in another plane of consciousness, different frequency world where communication is made by thought, telepathically. It's the feeling where you do not see anything but FEEL the presence in the room. One morning, I felt really bad, I couldn't keep my thoughts straight, I felt completely as if other beings entered my own, I called my mother and told her

"Mother I lied to you, I was smoking marijuana a lot, take me to hospital"

I had voices in my head I couldn't control anymore. My sister helped me to pack and while we were on our way to the hospital I felt COMPLETELY possessed. No other word can describe that. I threw myself on the ground and started screaming uncontrollably, many people gathered, I was aware of my behavior but I couldn't stop. I no longer had power over my body. My sister cried asking me "Anna, sweetheart what is happening, Anna" she thought I was dying. I was experiencing the biggest torment in my whole life, I was yelling Jesus help me but all I heard was those demonic spirits doing anything they wanted with me. I instantly knew even subconsciously, that my involvement with the spirit realm was something very wrong. I later found out what God says about contacting the dead that it's forbidden for our own good. Ambulance was called. I was transported to a mental hospital where I spent one week, got better, was released and moved to another city to live with my mother for some time. Sadly, I didn't learn my lesson and accused her of everything.

Then one night, after an argument with her, I fell asleep and woke up surrounded by evil spirits mocking me, telling me I would burn in hell, I was a spirit in that dream, I didn't have a body, I woke up terrified, and for the second time in my life I felt other spiritual beings entering me. Those feelings of terror were so profound I couldn't stop them. I had no control over my mind. Those 2 demonic attacks, made me change. I realized I was acting like a spoiled child, not giving my mother the respect she deserved. They made me realize that there is hell for sure, Satan is alive and so is Jesus Christ. Satan lies to you, makes you blind. I was afraid I would burn in Hell so I started to go to Church. While I was preparing for my baptism I had a chance for the first time in my life to get to know who Jesus Christ really was. I realized He died for me, so I could be saved. I asked Jesus into my heart.

My Life Since I Became A Christian

The day I asked to receive Jesus Christ into my heart, all of a sudden I felt some beautiful force

entering my mind, so beautiful I wanted to cry. I heard words

"I forgive you."

It was a Holy Spirit. I felt amazing peace afterwards. God knew my heart, he saw my despair and fear and my trying.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

I am a living proof that no matter how bad you sinned, if you truly are sorry and with all your heart you seek Christ you will be forgiven. Put your pride aside, don't be ashamed, kneel down and confess your sins to God in Jesus Christ name just now, and He will hear you. God wants to forgive you, you just need to give Him a chance. That day I decided to follow Jesus Christ for the rest of my life. He truly gave me a new heart and new eyes. I no longer put looks first. I am looking for my worth somewhere else that is in Jesus Christ. I saw how greedy I was in my past and prideful. I loved material things. I was sure I was a sinless, innocent baby, where in reality I was committing so many sins on a daily basis. That is how Satan fooled me and closed my eyes so I just couldn't see.

I believe God let me experience demonic/spiritual attacks to open my eyes and to warn others. If that didn't happen I would still smoke marijuana and mess with spirit realm. Please remember that any drug that changes our consciousness opens the gate to demonic activity. I am more than happy to answer any questions annamalaak at gmail dot com

Video version of my testimony

https://youtu.be/erSxTwaU6-I

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-27-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Our first reading is from one of the first five books of Bible, the Books of the Law. The second reading is from the letter of St. Paul to the church in Rome, which explains the basic elements of the Gospel. Finally, the reading from St. Matthew includes the final instructions of Jesus to his disciples.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Deuteronomy, the name which means "second law." In reading Deuteronomy it's helpful to remember that God is not only reminding Israel the law but also of her special place in his love; they are his chosen people. Furthermore, in this repeating of the law given to Moses, God is reminding the nation of their responsibility to live within the sphere of that love. Special privilege, as God's chosen people, always means increased spiritual responsibility. This last Book of the Law was written by Moses near the end of his life. Just before today's reading we learn that God forbid Moses from entering the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 3:36). Although God didn't oblige Moses' request to go and visit the land, He did provide Moses with a panoramic view of the land from on top of Mount Pisgah (v. 27).

Today's As you read the passage, reflect on God's special love for those who follow Him, and how this love is played out through God's protection and sovereign control of circumstances.

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 4:32-40 NAS95 32 Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? 33 Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it,*

> *and survived? 34 Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35 To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. 36 Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. 37 Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, 38 driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in and to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is today. 39 Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other. 40 So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.*

In this passage, God reminds his people of his miraculous care for them up to this point as they journey on to the Promised Land. He has provided for them as for no other people. He delivered them miraculously from slavery in Egypt, and He was delivering them from nations much larger and more powerful than they. He has spoken to them through Moses, and He had disciplined them for their failures, but always in order to restore them. God reminded them of the conditional nature of His covenant with Moses, where obedience was required in order to obtain the promised blessings. "So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you" (v. 40). God had repeatedly warned the Hebrew people about this necessity, and we know from the later Books in the Bible that they missed the mark in obeying Him.

In applying today's reading to our lives, we recognize that we are under a New Covenant with God made through the blood of Jesus Christ. We entered this covenant when we placed our trust in Him and not in any merit found in ourselves (Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8-9). As believers in Jesus Christ we are in a unique position in contrast to those we just read about who were under the Mosaic Law. God has provided us with His Holy Spirit Who lives in our hearts which provides us with the ability to obey Him. While we live under God's grace His Holy Spirit compels us with the ability to obey Him while we can look back at the Old Testament Law and observe How God cared for and guided His people. We will learn more about how God empowers us through His Spirit in the second reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The first reading is from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is how as believers we are heirs with Christ, not only in His exultation but also in His suffering (Romans 5:3, Romans 8:17). As we just looked at God's warning given to Moses about the requirement for obedience, we see in the verses in Romans leading up to today's reading how God provides us with the Holy Spirit to empower us to obey. "[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. For all who are being led by the Spirit

of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14). We pick up with today's reading in verse 14.

Second Reading:

> *Romans 8:14-17 NAS95 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" 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.*

In the reading we see the relationship of the Christian to God. It's not an association of fear, as one who is under the bond of slavery. Rather, the person who is "led by the Spirit of God" is considered an adopted son and can rightfully speak of God as his father. What's more, as an adopted son, he is also an heir; he has an unspeakable inheritance (which Paul writes about in his letter to the Ephesians). In fact, the Christian is a co-heir with Christ. All that God has planned for Jesus, who obeyed the Father even to His death and resurrection, will be shared with his adopted brothers. There is a word of caution, however. Paul writes that the Christian will suffer with Christ (see also Romans 5:3) and later be glorified with Him. If our faith in Jesus is genuine, we will be willing to suffer for Him, not to earn salvation in any way, because He has paid the full price for that, but to demonstrate our love, obedience, and loyalty to Him.

Saint John said, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). We see this in today's reading where the Holy Spirit Who lives within us cries out "with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16b). How glorious is it that we have God's living testimony within our hearts to help us especially during out times of doubt!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew. The context is the very closing of the Book where Jesus met with His disciples just prior to His ascension back to heaven.

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."*

These verses are known as Jesus' "Great Commission." Here Jesus provides a summary commandment to His disciples, and by means of application to all believers regarding the work that He left us here on earth to accomplish. The question of obedience that we saw in the first reading is

also mentioned in this reading. In these few verses, we hear Jesus making His final appeal to his disciples, giving them instructions, clearly stating what his purpose is for them. To settle the doubts of some, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that He has all necessary authority to commission them, and, what's more, He assures them of his presence with them throughout the future. Jesus is the God that we heard speaking with authority in the first reading, and the God that lives within us and testifies to us that we saw in the second reading. God had promised (especially in John's Gospel) that He would send his Holy Spirit to lead, teach, and counsel them in his absence. Sandwiched between the statement of his authority and the promise of his presence is the distinct purpose which He has for them. They are to go, make disciples, baptize them (in the name of the Holy Trinity), and teach them to obey all that He has commanded (vv. 19 – 20).

Jesus' calling makes it clear that in our day we are to make disciples, that is, we are to take the gospel message to the world and encourage them to put their faith in the Son of God who sacrificed his life to pay the penalty for mankind's sin. The evidence of that believing faith is baptism into the name of the triune God. But there's something beyond faith and baptism. We are to teach new disciples "to observe (or obey) all" of Christ's commands.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw how Moses relayed God's message of the need for obedience to the people under the Law. In what ways do we as believers in the New Covenant have it "easier" to obey God?

2. In the second reading Paul said, "but you have received a spirit of **adoption** as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15). How might this verse resonate with someone who was adopted into their family? In what ways could this speak to the person who never experienced a loving, human father? In what ways can you relate, and how does knowing God make the difference?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-20-2018

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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).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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. Note that the reading this week skipped verses 8 -11, these are included in order to provide the proper clarity of Saint Paul's instruction.

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.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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.

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

Gospel Reading:

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

What did Jesus mean when he said in verse 23, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained"? The key to understanding Jesus' teaching in verse 23 is found in the previous two verses. Jesus said "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (v.21b). Next in verse 22 He promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. This "sending" or "commissioning" of the disciples (and all believers) is one of the main purposes of the

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

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

I remember how many times I used to see my neighbor returning to work after dinner to make phone calls to people that he knew would only be at home in the evening. One particular night I was driving home from the local lake after spending a couple of hours windsurfing, which is one of my favorite pastimes. As I turned the corner on the road leading up to our house at around 7:00 pm, I recognized my neighbor as he drove by me on the way back to work at our local Christian college. Although he goes into work at 8:00 in the morning he usually returns after dinner. Although God has gifted this man in a variety of ways, through it all is one of his preeminent qualities: faithfulness. His example has truly inspired me to be faithful as well. Although God doesn't call everyone to work 10 plus hours each day on a fixed salary as my neighbor does, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Reflection Questions

1. God provides us with a list of spiritual gifts in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11. We looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today. Read each of the other passages and see if you can locate some of the other spiritual gifts including: Administration, Knowledge, Apostleship, Leadership, Discernment, Mercy, Evangelism, Miracles, Exhortation, Pastor/Shepherd, Faith, Prophecy, Giving, Serving/Ministering, Healing, Teaching, Interpretation of Tongues, Tongues, Wisdom. As you read these verses, think about the ways in

which you serve God.

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

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

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

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

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

In what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God? How does understanding your spiritual gift(s) help you to better serve God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-13-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week Marla shares the study of the readings beginning with Acts 1 where Peter explains how God's plan unfolds just as the Scriptures said. Next, we move to 1 John 4, where the apostle John tells us that those who abide in God, love as He loved. Finally, we conclude with John 17:11-19 where St. John records Jesus' prayer for His disciples just before He sends them out to minister in His name.

Introduction to the First Reading:

If you were a fan of the 80s show *The A-Team,* you will remember the iconic phrase spoken at the end of nearly every episode, "I love it when a plan comes together." In a make-believe story the plan always comes together—the writers make it so. Real-life human plans are not so reliable and can be thwarted. God's plan, however, always comes together exactly as God says. No one is strong enough to thwart His plan.

Before Jesus was taken up into heaven, He told His apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit which would give them power to be Christ's witnesses to the world. (The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit indwelling believers, enabling them to understand the truth and empowering them to do the work God has for them.) It was during this period of waiting that Peter spoke to the apostles and over 100 believers gathered with them. Here Peter reminds them that God's plan was being fulfilled just as the Scriptures said.

First Reading:

> ***Acts 1:15-26 NAS95 15 At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, 16 "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the***

> ***mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. 17 For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. 19 And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE, AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT'; and, 'LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.' 21 Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us– 22 beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us–one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." 23 So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen 25 to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.***

Judas, one of the original twelve apostles, walked intimately with Jesus during the three years of His ministry. He heard Jesus' powerful words, witnessed His healing touch, and participated in His miraculous acts. Yet by a decision of his own evil heart, Judas betrayed his Lord and turned Him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. It did not catch Jesus by surprise but was, with all its tragic detail, just as the Scriptures foretold. Judas' betrayal, as sinful as it was, did not thwart God's ultimate plan for man's salvation but rather was a step in its fulfillment.

When Judas, consumed by guilt, took his own life, a new apostle had to be chosen from the men who had been with Jesus from the beginning. Only two men qualified, Joseph and Matthias. The apostles prayed for God guidance and cast lots to discover God's choice. In that day, lots were cast by writing each eligible person's name on a piece of stone or wood, putting the pieces in an urn, and drawing out a name. * God's plan was fulfilled when Matthias' name was chosen.

We can be confident that God has a plan for us, too, and He will make it come together for our ultimate good and His glory. I love it when His plan comes together!

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First John. A theme of the overall Book could be suggested as something like "tests for salvation" since so many times throughout John uses phrases which follow a pattern of if / then. In the context of today's reading, chapter 4 opens with his admonition, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false

prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). He then provides a test by which believers may know whether a spirit is of God or of the enemy. "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (v. 2). Since God is love (v. 8) we share in the love of God as believers that the Lord Jesus has indeed come in the flesh. The reading expands upon this common love that we share as believers.

Second Reading:

> ***1 John 4:11-16 NAS95 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. 14 We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.***

In the six verses of our reading, the word *love* and its derivatives are used eight times. God is the author and source of true love. If God did not exist, love would not exist for God is love. He powerfully demonstrated it by sending Jesus to fulfill the greatest act of love known to mankind—a substitutionary death on a cross. Romans 5:8 says, *"God demonstrated his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* Jesus didn't die for a good cause or a good man. He died for you and me, not after we cleaned up our life, but while we were still lost in our sin. His death for us was the Innocent dying for the guilty, the Perfect dying for the broken, the Holy dying for the sinful. Can there be any greater demonstration of love?

Is it any wonder then, that love is a hallmark of one who abides in God? *Abide* is a word that means "to stay in a given place, continue, dwell, remain" (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, # 3306). St. John tells us we come to abide in God by confessing Jesus is the Son of God and believing the love God has for us as demonstrated through Christ's death. And when we abide in Him we will love as He loved. It is important to understand, however, that we don't love *in order* to abide. We love *because* we abide in Him. When we receive God's love and extend it to others, we prove that we abide in the One who is love.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

When I left my son at college for the first time, I knew I would not see him again for six months. On the 12-hour ride, his father and I reminded him of the important precepts we had taught him about God and living the Christian life. We were hoping he would continue to walk the path of faith and not stray from the truth of the Scriptures. After settling him into his dorm and expressing our love through hugs and tears, we prayed and released him into the Father's care.

For three years, Jesus had lived and ministered with the ones he chose to be his disciples. He loved

them, revealed himself to them, and taught them what was to come. Though they heard him and were witnesses of His miraculous works, they didn't fully understand that He would die for sin, rise from the dead, and return to God the Father. It was now time for Jesus to fulfill His Father's will and to set in motion all the prophesies spoken about Him in the Old Testament. And it was time to say goodbye. The disciples would have to face a world of opposition and persecution without him, and they were understandably bewildered and sad.

In Ch. 13 of the Gospel of St. John, Jesus begins an extended, heart-felt goodbye. He would shortly send them out to serve others so He gave them a powerful demonstration of servanthood by washing the disciples' feet, an act typically done by the servants of the household. Jesus said, *"… I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you* (John 13: 15). In Ch. 14, He comforts them by explaining that He is building a home for them in heaven and someday will come again to take them there. In the meantime, they are to get their nourishment and power by abiding (remaining) in Him as branches get their life by remaining in the vine (Ch. 15). In Ch. 16, He promises the Holy Spirit will empower them (and every believer) to carry on His ministry and to lead them into all truth. Now in Ch. 17, on the night He was betrayed, Jesus prays for the disciples as he sends them out to minister in His name.

Gospel Reading:

> ***John 17:11-19 NAS95 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. 12 "While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled. 13 "But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. 14 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. 16 "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 17 "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. 18 "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.***

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus makes three requests of the Father:

1). Jesus prays that the Father would keep the disciples in His name.

What is Jesus asking for when He says to the Father, *keep them in your name*? His *name* refers to all that God is and all that Jesus revealed Him to be. Jesus and the Father are one. As Christians, we are united to them and carry the same name. To live in God's name is to live in a way that reflects his character. While Jesus was with His disciples, He kept them in God's name and none of them were lost except Judas. Did Jesus fail to keep Judas in God's name? D.A. Carson in his commentary

on The Gospel of John explains, "The defection of Judas is foreseen in Scripture [Ps. 41:10], and therefore no evidence of failure on Jesus' part." Jesus had kept His disciples and now that He was leaving, He asks the Father to keep His disciples faithful to His name.

2). Jesus prays that the Father would keep them from the evil one.

The forces of evil are real and oppose all God wants to accomplish in the world. Satan himself prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). God could have taken His disciples out of the world, but left them here as ministers of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is also why we are here. Jesus doesn't ask for them to be removed from the world but that they might be protected from the evil one while they do His work.

3). Jesus prays that the Father would sanctify them by truth.

Sanctify means *to make holy* and has the idea of being set apart for holy use or a holy purpose. (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, # 37, 40). Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is holy in his being but was also set apart for a holy purpose—to be the sacrifice for sin. As God the Son, He is separate from the evil world system, but He willingly entered into the world to save it through His death on a cross. As the disciples came to believe in Jesus, they also were sanctified for a holy work—to take the truth of the gospel to a lost world. Everyone who believed the disciples message would also be sanctified in truth for the words they bring are God's words. And we also are sanctified when we believe the Bible, God's written word of truth.

Reflection Questions

1. If we abide in God we will love others as God loved us. What can you do this week to demonstrate God's love to those around you?

2. Like the disciples, you have been sanctified (set apart) by God for a holy purpose—to take the truth of the gospel to a lost world. What can you do this week to begin fulfilling God's purpose for your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-06-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week discuss the concept of abiding in Christ during the Gospel lesson. What does it means to abide in Christ?

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after God had shown Peter in a vision that all food was good for him to eat; he no longer had to obey the kosher laws observed by the Jews. As we will see, the meaning of Peter's vision went far beyond just the food laws. At about this same time, a God fearing centurion from Caesarea saw a vision of an angel who commanded him to send for Peter who was in Joppa. This man named Cornelius sent some servants to Peter who then traveled back to Caesarea. The reading opens with Peter entering Cornelius' house.

Note: We have included the verses that were omitted in the reading and bolded the ones that were covered in the Mass.

> ***First Reading:***
>
> *Acts 10:25-48 NAS95*
>
> ***25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man."***

Omitted:

27 As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. 28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. 29 That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me." 30 Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, 31 and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 'Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.' 33 "So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.

Omitted:

36 The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Cornelius' immediate response to seeing Peter is to worship him, an action that Peter immediately forbid because "I too am just a man," he said. This is similar to what happened when John bowed down to worship the angel in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 19:10, and again in Revelation 22:9). In the latter case, the angel sternly warned John saying, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 19:10). In any case, Cornelius was obviously overcome by Peter, either because of his sincere expectation of finding a great man, or perhaps because of some spiritual aura that emanated from him. Remember, Cornelius had just seen a vision of an angel telling him to locate Peter. As the story continues, Peter explained how God revealed to him the deeper meaning behind the vision he had seen. In verse 34, Peter explained how the Prophet Isaiah foresaw that God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ wasn't limited just to the Jews but extended to anyone who believed (v. 34, Isaiah 42:6). Peter's speech came after he had seen a vision of a great sheet descending from the sky and filled with animals that were ceremonially unclean to the Jews (Acts 10:9-16). In this vision, God commanded Peter to "kill and eat," and said that these animals were not to be regarded as clean because they had been cleansed by God (v. 15). In order to further emphasize the importance of this vision God repeated it three times. Therefore, when Peter met with Cornelius and heard about the miraculous events that had happened with him too seeing a vision from God (in the form of an angel) Peter understood that the plan of salvation had been extended to the Gentiles. In the New Testament era the church has stepped in where Peter left off, proclaiming the message of salvation to everyone, not just to the Jews, as was Peter's primary ministry.

At the conclusion of the reading, an amazing thing happened which was the pouring out of the Holy Spirit of God on the Gentiles who were present in the room and came to believe in Jesus Christ through Peter's preaching. Peter's immediate response to this marvelous event was to command the new believers to be baptized (vv. 47 – 48). These events confirmed Peter's testimony that the plan of salvation extended to both Jews and Gentiles alike (vv. 34 – 35), and opened the door for the explosive growth of the new church throughout the Roman world. As Gentile believers we may be tempted to take it for granted that the plan of salvation extended to anyone who believed. However, we must remember that God chose the Jews for the unveiling of His divine plan and the ultimate revelation of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul taught us that after the Jewish Jesus was martyred for His faith and rose from the dead, God allowed "a partial hardening [to happen] to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

I remember a conversation that I had many years ago with a woman who claimed she was "spiritual" but wasn't a Christian. Although I was a faithful attender of Sunday Mass, I didn't know how to debate the meaning of what she called "spirituality" versus what constituted Christianity. I have remembered our interaction over the years, to the extent that I can even recall where we were when she told me this. In recent years, I have come to the understanding that much of what purports to be spiritual is decidedly un-Christian. In the introduction to the second reading, we will look at the nature of beliefs that are opposed to Jesus Christ. Then with this understanding of the context, we will learn about love in the context of the true believers.

The second reading continues from First John, which we studied last week. This week we move to chapter four in which John explains in the opening verses before today's reading the nature of false spirits including the Antichrist. False spirits are those that "[do] not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world" (1 John 4:3). True spirits are those "that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). Next, John comforts the believers by telling them, "You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (v. 4). There is a sense that a spirit of Antichrist inhabits anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus Christ, and therefore opposes God, while believers are much different. There is no middle ground, either you are for Jesus or you are against Him. John continues, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (v. 6). There is great dichotomy between believers who confess that Jesus is the Messiah from God, and those that deny this. The first group is called the children of God (1 John 3:1), the latter group is of the spirit of the Antichrist. With this dichotomy in mind, let's proceed to the reading.

Second Reading:

> *1 John 4:7-10 NAS95 7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

In the reading, we see why the context is so important in understanding the meaning. John further expanded upon the theme that he began in chapter 4, the differences and nature of unbelievers as contrasted with believers. Believers "love one another," are "born of God" (see John 3:3), and "know God" (v. 7). In contrast, anyone "who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (v. 8). Next, John explains that "the love of God was manifested in us," that through Jesus "we might live through Him" (v. 9), meaning the love and power that flows to us through His Holy Spirit Who was given to us the moment we believed. We saw this happen in the first reading when the group was assembled in Cornelius' house. When they believed after hearing Peter's preaching, they were given power from on high, in fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to His disciples (Luke 24:49). Finally, John reminded his readers that the greatest expression of love wasn't that the believers loved God, but that God loved them by giving His one and only Son for their sins (vv. 9 – 10).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The first two readings logically connect with the Gospel lesson in which we see Jesus' teaching on the nature of a believer's love of God. The context of the reading is Jesus' parting words to His disciples during the Last Supper.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 15:9-17 NAS95 9 "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. 17 This I command you, that you love one another."*

Several important points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how Jesus opened this section with the conditional phrase, "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love" (v. 10a). The word "love" that appears multiple times throughout the reading beginning in verse 9 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 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 in verse 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." We are to express our keeping of the law by loving one another with Jesus sacrificial love as our example.

Second, notice the number of repetitions of the word "abide" in the reading, which gives us the main point of this Gospel lesson. Jesus uses the word "abide" three times in verses 9 through 10. Anytime we see a repeated word, it means we must give it special attention, as Jesus was intentional in using this word so many times in such a short span. The word "abide" in the original text primarily means to dwell, but also to stay, remain, be true to, or persevere. Read verse 9 again, but when you do substitute some of these alternative words. *"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; **abide** in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will **abide** in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and **abide** in His love" (emphasis added).* God calls us to stay in Christ, in submission to Him, and not to stray. This means to follow His commands with Him as the Master and center of our lives. Through having this focus we will experience the love of God that He desires for our lives.

Finally, notice the number of times that Jesus referred to Himself by using the pattern of words "My," "Me" or "I" followed by "you." Here are the first two:

- "Just as the Father has loved **Me**, I have also loved **you**" (v. 9)
- "If you keep **My** commandments, **you** will abide in **My** love" (v. 10)

From this, it is evident that in His farewell discourse Jesus is telling His disciples (and us) that He is

the one and only true pattern of love. "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you" (v. 9). As the Father loved the most worthy Jesus He then loved His most unworthy disciples. In the same way, Jesus loves us even though we too are unworthy of Him. For it is "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The famous spiritual author Henri Nouwen had perhaps the firmest grasp of the concept of abiding of anyone this side of heaven. He said about Jesus' invitation to abide in Jesus verse 10 that it was "an invitation to total belonging, to full intimacy, to an unlimited being with." As true disciples of Jesus, we don't approach Him only to experience His love. Instead, we remain (abide) as a branch connected to the vine in order to bear much fruit (v. 16). Unless we abide we cannot bear fruit, in the same way that a branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains completely attached the vine. It is through this intimate connection that we may experience the fullness of Christ's love for us.

If you haven't read any of Henri Nouwen, I would encourage you to read *The Way of the Heart*: Henri J. M. Nouwen (Ballantine, 2003). In this short book, he has helped many Christians to better understand the concept of abiding in Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. As you journey through life this week, ponder Jesus' invitation to abide in Him. What does that look like in your life? What small changes could you make this week to begin a closer journey with abiding in Jesus? Is there anything that is standing between you and abiding in Jesus?

2. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Jesus referred to Himself by using the pattern of words "My," "Me" or "I" followed by "you." Make a list of all of the times that Jesus said that in the reading. Read over your list several times. What can you learn from Jesus in this list in terms of both the proofs and results of His love?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 04-29-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts in which we see the newly converted Saul of Tarsus testifying to the Jews in Jerusalem who then try to kill him. Then we cover the second reading from First John in which we learn about the heart of the child of God. Then we conclude with the Gospel lesson from John 15 in which Jesus shares an analogy of the believer being a branch of the true vine of Jesus with God as the vinedresser.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to Christianity, who is now called Paul. The chapter opened with Saul viciously attacking the church and after visiting the high priest, "asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:2). As Saul was on the way to Damascus, he experienced the Lord Jesus in a voice from heaven (v. 5) as well as a light flashing from heaven (v. 3). Next, Saul found himself to be blind and was led by the hand into Damascus (v. 8) to await further instruction from the Lord (v. 6). Once in Damascus he was still blind and didn't eat or drink for three days (v. 9). At this point God directed a disciple of Jesus named Ananias to go meet with Saul even though he had heard about his treachery against the followers of Jesus (vv. 10 – 16). Ananias did as God directed and laid his hands upon his "enemy" Saul for healing.

It is instructive for us to include the verses in Acts 9 leading up to today's reading in order to better understand the full context. Here we encounter a humbled and blind Saul fresh from his encounter with the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road.

> *Acts 9:18-21 NAS95 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; 19 and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"*

As we move to the reading for today, Saul had continued staying in Damascus and testifying about the truth of the Lord Jesus as the Messiah (v. 22). This provoked the Jews to hatch a plot to kill him, so the believers snuck him out by lowering him down from the city wall in a basket (v.25).

First Reading:

> *Acts 9:26-31 NAS95 26 When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. 30 But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. 31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.*

This was the first occasion that the Jerusalem church met the newly converted Saul. In spite of their fear of him, the disciples listened to Barnabas' testimony about him. Saul then went on with his business of ministering to the Jews. They didn't receive his message very well since they began to attempt to kill him (v. 29). Thankfully, the disciples heard about it and moved him to Caesarea, then sent him back to his home town of Tarsus. Interestingly, once Saul departed from the region the church enjoyed a time of peace and continued to grow (v. 31).

What can we take away from the reading? Imagine how Saul must have felt when, just a short time before he would have been openly received by the Hellenistic Jews, yet now they tried to kill him. This was all because of his newfound relationship with Jesus Christ Whom he encountered on the Damascus Road. As believers, we should expect that those people who we knew us before we came to believe in the Lord Jesus may not warmly receive our new beliefs. This certainly shouldn't keep us from sharing it with them, to the extent that they are open to it. Jesus warned that "in this world we will have trouble" (John 16:33).

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Letter of First John. The context is John's teaching on the characteristics of the child of God, meaning true believers in Jesus Christ. John opened the chapter by saying, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him" (v. 1). The world is at odds with the children of God, because unbelievers are by nature children of the father of this world, the devil (John 8:44).

Second Reading:

> *1 John 3:18-24 NAS95 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 19 We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him 20 in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. 23 This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24 The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*

In this reading, John is describing the nature of godly love of a believer. This type of love results in action motivated by the truth of the Gospel message (v. 18, "in deed and truth"). The clear conscience of a believer testifies that they are walking in the truth because God, who knows all things, testifies through their conscience (v. 21). The true child of God is in good standing with Him such that when they pray God hears and answers them (v. 22a). The author of Hebrews said about this, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" Hebrews 4:16). Finally, John said, "The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him" (v. 24a). This means that God hears our prayers because of our special relationship with Jesus Who gave us a new spiritual heart at the moment we believed (John 3:3, "born from above"). God doesn't hear us just because we keep His commandments, but because of this special relationship that is founded upon abiding love. The love that believers express is something that God modeled when He sent Jesus Christ to die on our behalf. The believer benefits from what is called the "double imputation." This means that our sins were imputed to Christ (the first imputation), and the righteousness of Christ was then imputed to us (the second imputation).

The application of John's message is that godly people act like it by expressions of deeds motivated by the truth of God. They model the love of God that was imputed to them through Jesus' death and resurrection. They do so with a clear conscience since God testifies in their heart that they are indeed a child of God. On the other hand the person that is not yet in right standing with God through the only way possible, belief in the Lord Jesus, will have their conscience pricked by the testimony of the Gospel. Others who are unresponsive to the Gospel have had their conscience's

seared, and turn away from the good news (1 Timothy 4:2). If our conscience is grounded in the truth, it can tell us a lot about our heart's true status with God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John 15. The context is Jesus' parting instructions to His disciples before the events that happened during the last week of His earthly ministry. The reading today includes several uses of the phrase "I am" which Jesus' disciples would have understood as a strong statement of His divinity. In chapter 8 Jesus had told the Pharisees, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). They rejected His claim of being equal with God (John 10:30, "I and the Father are One"). In this reading, the disciples are privileged hearers of Jesus' instruction into some deeper truths about God.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 15:1-8 NAS95 1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."*

There are several key points that Jesus is making in this reading. First, Jesus is the true vine. A vine is the life-giving conduit to the branches. Jesus makes this parallel to emphasize that life is only found through a relationship with Him. Second, He states that the Father is the "vinedresser" (v. 1), meaning that He is the person Who planted and cultivated the vineyard. The Father is the Person who sovereignly nurtures the growth and productivity of each person who is connected to the vine. Third, the Father takes an active rule in the pruning process in the lives of believers. This is done through His love with the goal of producing more fruit. A key word that is repeated throughout this passage is the word "abide." We don't tend to use that word very much in English, but in this context it means to remain, dwell, or live in Jesus. Fruit bearing is evidence of our right relationship with Jesus, and this glorifies the Father. We tend to think of fruit as good deeds or proper choices, but Scripture actually gives us an indication of the type of fruit that should be the evidence of God at work in our lives. Paul said, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). Bearing this type of fruit definitely takes a work of God's Spirit in us, which goes beyond the outward appearance of good deeds and requires a changed heart.

How does one abide in Christ's love? Jesus actually answers that later in verse 10. "If you keep My

commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Jesus summed up the commandments in Matthew's Gospel when he answered the question about the greatest commandment. He said, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Therefore, we find out that we can't keep the law just by keeping the law, because the law is to love. One reason Jesus correlates keeping God's commandments and loving Him is because it takes a trusting relationship to obey God and to keep His commands from the heart. To do things God's way does not come naturally to us. The only way we can truly keep His commandments is by being deeply connected and dependent upon Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you experienced rejection or hardship as a result of your faith in Jesus Christ? How does reading about Paul's opposition encourage you to persist in your pursuit of spiritual things?

2. The second and third readings dealt with abiding in Christ and keeping His commandments. Is there a way to be "obedient" without abiding in Christ? Why do you think Jesus made such a strong connection between abiding, obedience, and bearing much fruit?

3. Why it is important for the vinedresser to prune the branches? Have you or are you experiencing any type of pruning that this passage can help you to understand God's ways and love for you during this time?

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