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 08-30-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Jeremiah and a reading from this great prophet of God in whom we find many similarities to Peter and Paul. Then move to the second reading from Saint Paul from Romans 12 in which he warns about not being conformed to the world. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we see a certain circumstance in which Peter found himself conformed to a false belief taught by the world.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. Known as the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah was one of the most prolific prophetic writers in the Old Testament having written both the Book by his name as well as Lamentations. He began writing during the reign of godly King Josiah beginning in 627 BC and continued during the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 586 by the Babylonians. A key verse that summarizes the situation in Israel during this time is found in the closing chapter of the Book. "For through the anger of the LORD this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out

from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 52:3)

God was angry with the people for a variety of reasons, but foremost among them was that they had turned away from their worship of the One True God and instead worshiped dead idols. Female deities were frequent objects of worship in the Old Testament. For example, God said:

"Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me" (Jeremiah 7:17-18).

God was angry with them because they were baking cakes and offering cakes to the "queen of heaven," who was the female deity of their day. This goddess was likely someone associated with grace and blessing. The Scripture is clear that all grace flows through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God was clear that worship was to be given to Him alone. The Jews were commanded not only to forsake worship of foreign gods but also not to even **create** an image of any deity, be it of the True or God or any god. Interestingly enough, this law was binding upon them and all New Testament believers (see John 14:15, this goes beyond the Ten Commandments as in John 13:34). As well worshiping an image they were not to even **create** an image of even the True God and assign worship to it in any manner. God knew that when they built something to honor Him that they would fall into worship of the image and not God Himself. The Second Commandment given by God to Moses spelled this out very clearly to them:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)

If that were all that was going on then perhaps God would have relented in His judgment of them through allowing Babylon to overcome the nation and destroy Jerusalem. However, conditions in Israel were even worse than that as we see further on in Jeremiah Chapter 7:

30 "For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight," declares the LORD, "they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. 31 They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

Not only did they offer sacrifices in the temple to false gods, they even sacrificed their own children in a fire. This was the context of the first reading today. As you read, try to imagine the anguish that Jeremiah must have been experiencing because of the extreme misbehavior of God's chosen people.

First Reading:

7 O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; Everyone mocks me. 8 For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted In reproach and derision all day long. 9 But if I say, "I will not remember Him Or speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, And I cannot endure it. (Jeremiah 20:7-9)

In the reading and in light of the context we see the passion of the Prophet Jeremiah in pleading with the Jewish people to repent of their sin and turn to the worship of the True God as prescribed in their Law. Jeremiah said that the people derided him in spite of the fact that what he was telling them was the truth and was for their own good (vv. 7-8). He said that it was impossible for him to contain within himself the words which the Lord God has given to him to proclaim. Later in the Gospel lesson we will see the similarity between Jeremiah and the Apostle Peter in his passion for God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading comes from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In this passage, he is encouraging the believers to respond to God with their whole lives:.

Second Reading:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

Paul begins his thought with the word "therefore." Whenever we see this word, we should ask: "what's the 'therefore' there for?" Paul gives some pretty heavy directions to the believers, but it is based in the reality of who God is, which he has spent the last 11 chapters talking about.

As you may recall from previous weeks, Paul was addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church at Rome. He just finished expounding on the mysteries of God, who in his kindness has grafted Gentiles into the true vine of faith. This is truly a wonderful chapter in salvation history, deliverance from God's wrath has been paid in full by Jesus Christ's death on the cross. That is the basis of the "therefore". So this is what Paul is saying: as a result of God's mercies, it is only fitting to respond to Him with our whole lives; body mind, and spirit.

Have you ever seen people who profess to be Christians, but only act like it when they are at church or around other Christians? Then you see them at work or at a gathering acting in ways that are contrary to the way of Christ. They may using foul language, mistreating a waitress, or even cheating in order to get ahead. This is problematic because it is inconsistent with the reality of God's mercy in their life. Paul says in this passage that Christianity is a wholistic endeavor. God is looking for true worship. We cannot compartmentalize our spirituality to one day a week or around certain spiritual activities. All of life can be a spiritual endeavor if we give ourselves fully to God as a living sacrifice. God is worthy of our bodies being submitted to Him, that includes our behaviors, actions and what comes out of our mouths.

What are we sacrificing? We are sacrificing doing things according to the "flesh" which Paul likens to the worldly system that has infected every fiber of our being. The world's way operates according to doing what is right in our own eyes, without considering God and His ways. The world's way operates without God in the center. So Paul is urging his brothers (both Jew and Gentile) to not be squeezed into that dead end mold. Yes, it may feel like a sacrifice to put God at the center of your life, but it is what each person was designed for.

How do we get there? By the renewing of our mind. What does this mean? Our minds have been shaped by so many things: our family values, our cultural values, messages from the media, our experiences and how we have interpreted those experiences. Paul urges believers to be proactive about understanding what influences your perspective—and to exchange what has held you captive by lies for the freedom of the Truth. We know that the only reliable source of Truth is founded upon and consistent with the Bible. Jesus said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In context, He was pointing to Himself as the truth and to holding to His teaching as the only form of freedom from being captive to the lies of the enemy (satan). So the only real "sacrifice" in this passage of Romans is giving up the destructive lies in one's life and learning to live according to the Truth. That is why studying the Bible, hearing God's heart by biblical teachers and being around others who walk according to the Word of God is so important for our minds to be renewed. It may feel like we are swimming upstream at first, but God will slowly and surely renew our minds so that we will see that His will is good, pleasing and perfect. Paul urges his brothers and us, because he knows it a matter of life and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson let's and reflect upon what we learned from the first reading. Jeremiah's passion reminds us of one particular character in the New Testament. Whom jumps out at you as the one filled with passion for his people, one who sometime acted impulsively without regard for who those around him would respond? Cephas, whose name is translated as "Peter" (John 1:42), whose brother was the disciple Andrew, was just such as man. In his second Epistle, Peter spoke similar harsh words about the false teachers of his day:

1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; 7 and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep

the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17 These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18 For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. 20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. 22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (2 Peter 2:1-22)

I, like Peter, also have a passion for confronting false teaching. Some time ago a group of Jehovah's witnesses pulled up to my parent's house while I was visiting there one weekend. I knew how their operation worked, as only one of them got out of the car and the other two also recorded their "credit" for having made a household visit. I sensed in my spirit what was happening and I began to pray silently for God's guidance. As the man sat down at the picnic table outside I just happened to have a Bible ready along with a sheet of paper blank on at least one side. I drew three columns on the paper with a horizontal heading across each section to serve later as a title for each category. As we talked I began to fill in important details about the Person of Jesus Christ in each of the three columns. I filled out the columns like this and explained the biblical support for the first column.

_____	_____	_____
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by Jehovah
uncreated always existed	maker or all other things	maker of some things
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Column Chart I Made for the JW's

As we talked, the man began getting more agitated as he realized that his theological beliefs aligned with both the second **and** the third columns. I kept asking him, do you know anything about the religious cult about whom I am writing in that last column? The crowning blow came when I filled in titles for each of the categories:

Biblical Christianity	Jehovah Witness	Mormon
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by God
uncreated always existed and made all things	maker or all other things	maker of all things in partnership with God
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Suddenly the man stood up in a rage just at the exact time that my sister decided to stop by for a visit as she saw me sitting outside at the table. As I attempted to introduce my sister to him, the man screamed some obscenities at me and my sister and ran towards his car. I wonder what kind of call report he wrote down that day (follow this link to see their blank form)!

Many of us can relate to Saint Peter. Of all the disciples, Peter is the one with whom I most identify. Some of us are impulsive in our reactions and responses, especially in situations in which we feel the Lord Jesus has been disrespected. Peter like the Prophet Jeremiah, was a man of passion, the first of whom Jesus entrusted the "keys of the kingdom." Even Peter, the foremost of the disciples, was at least one time overcome by the forces of evil that raged especially violently during the period of Jesus' earthly ministry. Satan would stop at nothing to derail Jesus' ministry, even if he likely didn't understand all of the implications of Jesus' prediction of His own death. Matthew recorded the following incident which is the Gospel reading for today.

Gospel Reading:

21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. 22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 24 Then Jesus said to

His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS." (Matthew 16:21-27)

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first and too stock of his actions later. After having spent the better part of three years, he was obviously upset that anyone would harm Jesus, especially the chief priests and scribes. He was clearly the leader of the group of twelve disciples and the first one and a representative of all twelve to whom were later given the "keys of the kingdom," meaning that He entrusted them with the dispersion of the Gospel message to the world. His main role was as a witness to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Sometimes called the "first among equals," he played a leading role in the early church as can be seen in Acts Chapter 1 when he was the first to gather the ten remaining disciples in order to replace Judas Iscariot the traitor. Peter, whose heart was changed by the Holy Spirit, was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18). He was called a "pillar of the church" in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:9) and acted as the de facto spokesman of the disciples (see Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27, Mark 11:21, etc.). Peter's modus operando may have been something that those of us partial dyslexics can relate, "durry up and hoo something." Peter couldn't bear the thought of losing his best friend and ministry partner for whom he had dedicated his life the past several years. Peter, like Jeremiah and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when he was told that these nemeses would kill his Messiah!

Yes, the purposes of God had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter, who was overcome both with his passion and love of Jesus, was as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 23). The time of Jesus ministry was an era of extreme demonic activity. Almost a dozen times in the Gospels Jesus was confronted by a demon possessed person and cast it out of them (for example Matthew 9:33, Mark 7:26, Luke 4:33). Our enemy the devil seems to have a lot of capabilities, but we know for certain that Peter wasn't in any way "possessed by a demon." No, what happened in this incident was that Peter simply repeated a mantra that was implanted in the world by the father of the world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), Satan, the devil himself. This lie was the Messiah would come and set up his eternal kingdom without the need for anyone to deal with their sin, either in a personal or corporal sense for all of Israel. The people of the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) saw no need to humble themselves before God, repent of their sins, and allow God to give His life as the perfect, once for all sacrifice of sin forever (Hebrews 10:14). For a very brief instant Peter was conformed to this world, just as Paul warned about in the

second reading from Romans.

What does this mean in our lives? First, how have we responded to God's prophetic word? Have we like Jeremiah taken the Word and given it to others to watch the works of God unfold in their lives? Second, have we taken the Word into our own hearts and allowed God to transform us in such a way as Paul stated in the second reading? Are we offering our bodies as living sacrifices, something with which Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul have firmly conformed? Finally, what lies is **our** culture telling us today? What lies would we, like Peter, repeat in an instant when suddenly confronted with something that went against the world's teachings? What would be our reaction when invited to the wedding of a gay friend, how would we respond to the questions of the deacon board about our action in response to this event? Is it acceptable to love the sinner but hate the sin? These are things which we must reason with in advance such that when the sudden circumstance arises we are as Saint Peter said, ready to give a response" (1 Peter 3:15).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Peter impulsively responded to Jesus' prophecy concerning His coming death, burial, and resurrection. Think back to a time when you found yourself in a situation in which your faith was challenged and you responded impulsively without thinking about all of the implications of your actions. In light of the Gospel reading, what could you learn from Peter and Jesus in terms of how to respond in the future?

2. Review the past few weeks of your life. In what ways have you been tempted to be conformed to the pattern of this world? What lie is behind the temptation? What truth can you hold onto to help you to be faithful to God in the midst of ongoing temptation? If you are not sure how to answer these questions, pray to God right now and ask Him to open your eyes to the deceptive nature of sin and help you to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-23-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah where we see and explain meanings of the phrase "the key of the house of David." Then we move to the second reading from Romans 11 where you will read many additional verses beyond what was published in the lectionary in order to understand the meaning of God's Word based on its context. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel message from Matthew 16 and study the meaning of a phrase similar to what we saw in the first reading, "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" in which Jesus emphasized the importance of Peter as the first among equals of the disciples.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Before we begin, I will briefly review the format and method of these weekly study notes. The format can be understood from the acronym A-B-C but starting from the "C" and working backwards: context, big idea, and application. First, we provide the full scriptural context of the text including

verses that were omitted in the reading. We also provide the historical context along with the background and setting of the author. Second, we study the text in light of its historical context to determine the theological big idea. We develop this in light of a "Christological" focus, that is upon the redemptive message found throughout the Bible of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, whether in a future context as in the Old Testament or in a present or historical context as in the New Testament. We do not rely upon an allegorical interpretation but instead use the historical critical method and refer to the original languages and parallel passages whenever necessary. Finally, we provide several applications of the text for the present day Christian. Although there is usually only one main interpretation of the text, there are many possible applications. With these guiding principles in mind, let's move onto the first reading.

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The reading is a parenthesis in Chapter 22, meaning that it was a pause or temporary transition from the main theme. The theme that Isaiah was describing in the chapter before this parenthesis was the future destruction of Jerusalem that we know came over 125 years later in 586 B.C. Isaiah wrote just prior to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria in 722 B.C. The context of the reading is that an evil man named Shebna, who was the secretary of the treasury under King Hezekiah, built for himself a royal tomb so that his name would be remembered after he was dead. Evidently, this Shebna was misappropriating funds (see 2 Kings 18:18, 19:2, and Isaiah 36:3, 37:2). This reading includes verses 15-18 and verses 24-25, in order for you to read the whole section of Scripture.

First Reading:

15 Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts, "Come, go to this steward, To Shebna, who is in charge of the royal household, 16 'What right do you have here, And whom do you have here, That you have hewn a tomb for yourself here, You who hew a tomb on the height, You who carve a resting place for yourself in the rock? 17 Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong, O man. And He is about to grasp you firmly 18 And roll you tightly like a ball, To be cast into a vast country; There you will die And there your splendid chariots will be, You shame of your master's house.'

19 I will depose you from your office, And I will pull you down from your station. 20 Then it will come about in that day, That I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, 21 And I will clothe him with your tunic And tie your sash securely about him. I will entrust him with your authority, And he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, When

he shuts no one will open. 23 "I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, And he will become a throne of glory to his father's house.

24 So they will hang on him all the glory of his father's house, offspring and issue, all the least of vessels, from bowls to all the jars. 25 "In that day," declares the LORD of hosts, "the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 22:15-25)

God was angry with ungodly Shebna and Isaiah said that he would be deposed (v. 19) and replaced by godly Eliakim the son of Hilkiah (v. 20). Shebna squandered resources to build a tomb to enthrone his name in history (v. 16). The focus of the reading is upon the great contrast between Eliakim, a type of Christ, and Shebna, a type of Antichrist, and by application (and prophesy) between Christ and the Antichrist. Remember that a type is when persons (or statements) in the Old Testament prefigure the person of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For example, the Prophet Jonah, who spent three days and nights in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 1:17) was a type of Christ, in the same way that Jesus spent three days and three nights in the belly of the earth (Matthew 12:40). Eliakim typified the Person of Jesus Christ (as we see in verses 21-24). Jesus, Isaiah prophesied, would "be entrusted with authority (v. 21), become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (v. 21), and possess the "key of the house of David on his shoulder" (v. 24).

Jesus quoted from this passage, as we will see later in the Gospel lesson when He addressed Peter after this important disciple had confessed Jesus as the Messiah. There is a parallel between the trusted servant Eliakim and Peter the disciple of Jesus who came along much later. Both Eliakim and Peter were trusted servants, the latter so much so that Jesus said he would build His church upon him along with the other ten trusted disciples. There are other parallels that exist to the New Testament. The phrase in verse 22 "the key of the house of David" is very similar to a phrase used in the Book of Revelation. Saint John, the author of the Book said, "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this" (Revelation 3:7). John said that Jesus was the One Who "is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens" (v. 7). Jesus alone holds the keys to the kingdom.

The closing of this section of text is marked by a view of the end time tribulation period in which the false Christ, the Antichrist typified by Isaiah as Shebna, will be taken down (v. 25, Revelation

19:19-20). Isaiah said that the Antichrist, "the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off" (v. 25). We can trust that the true Jesus will overcome the false Christ but not until God has tolerated the hardness of almost the entire world's heart against believing in the Gospel message. Though God will speak the Good News to the world all at the same time through the voice of an angel (Revelation 14:6), precious few will believe. During the end time period God will call and redeem all of Israel (Romans 11:26).

Something that we can take away from the first reading includes God's eventual judgment of sin. Shebna, though he was rich and powerful, was not immune to God's judgment and the consequences of trusting in himself to make it through life. This is the essence of what it means to be "anti-Christ"—having a posture of self-reliance. In contrast, the Christ-follower is one who recognizes his or her own need for a Savior and invites Jesus into the daily stuff of life in order to let Christ rule and reign in our hearts.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading from Romans Chapter 11, we need to discuss a portion of text before the reading in order to bring out the meaning. The context is Paul's discussion about the future of Israel. Romans 9 dealt with Israel's past, Romans 10 with the present (in Paul's time), and Romans 11 with the future. As you read this first omitted section (Chapter 11 vv. 25-32), keep in mind the study last week regarding the unfolding of the revelation of the mystery of God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles.

25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery–so that you will not be wise in your own estimation–that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." 27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Romans 11:25-32)

Paul said that the reason God allowed the Jews to harden their hearts against the Messiah Jesus was to allow for the salvation of the Gentiles in the church. God loved the world so much that He allowed this mystery to accomplish His saving work for the Gentiles as prophesied in the Old Testament (Isaiah 49:6). Paul wrote as moved by the Holy Spirit about the unveiling of this phenomenal mystery.

Now let's read the actual second reading.

Second Reading:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

Paul marveled at the wisdom and knowledge of God (v. 33). How could God tolerate the hard-hearted Jews in order to provide for the salvation of the Gentiles? The ways of God are unfathomable (v. 33). The implication of this for our own lives is multi-dimensional. As we go through life, there are so many things that are out of our control that we do not understand. We know that God has the power to change things—yet, sometimes he doesn't do things according to what we think is best. This is the crisis of faith. Will we trust that God is wiser and more knowledgeable than we ourselves are? Or will we rail at God for being unloving and incompetent in our lives? While God doesn't cause evil, He does permit it (as in allowing the hearts of the Jews to be hardened). There is a choice that each believer in God has to make at some point in their relationship with God: Am I going to trust God's ways or am I going to trust in my ways above His ways? Throughout the Bible God uses His divine agents to accomplish His work, be they angels, prophets, animals, or even people like us. As we transition to the Gospel lesson, meditate upon the depth of the wisdom of God in the past biblical record in order to trust Him in the midst of any present-day confusing circumstances for your own life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading this week is from Matthew 16. Jesus had just been showing the disciples His supernatural power through the feeding of the 5,000 and a separate incident of feeding of the 4,000. After He did this Jesus warned them to beware of "the leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:11) and then He traveled with them to the region known as Caesarea Philippi. It is in this region that many pagans believed was the seat of the underworld, a place where immoral practices were done on a regular basis to appease the gods out from the "gates of hell." There were even niches carved out of the rock cliff in order to display the idols that were worshipped in this area. It is in this ominous and evil place that Jesus had a valuable lesson to teach His disciples.

Gospel Reading:

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." 20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20)

In the reading, Jesus clearly emphasized Peter as the foremost among the disciples and this along with other New Testament readings indicate that this disciple was something like "first among equals." Jesus told Peter that He would build His church upon both Peter and his confession of Jesus as the Christ. As we delve further into the analysis of the reading, we ask our readers to contemplate how Jesus could lay any authority for giving the Gospel message to the world on anyone, even Peter. Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and impatient, always wanting to take actions but maybe never thinking things through as thoroughly as he would later in his life.

Several significant points jump out of the text. First, Peter, the uncontested leader or the disciples, made the marvelous statement through the help of God the Father that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (v. 16). Jesus affirmed his confession and went on to elaborate upon Peter's statement. What did Jesus mean when He told Peter, "upon this rock I will build my church" (v.18b)? Jesus' meaning is clear when we look one level deeper into the plain meaning found in the original

language. Peter, whose name in Greek is "Petros", literally means "rock." However, the foundation on which Jesus spoke about building the church is a different Greek word "petra" which means a mass or rock. In context, what Jesus said was close to this paraphrase: "Simon, I am changing your name to Petros, and upon this petra (foundational mass of rock) I will build my church." Jesus said that He would build His church upon the foundation (petra, meaning mass of rock or many large rocks), which, in context, is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. However, Jesus clearly indicated that Peter was the foremost of these building blocks, the "first among equals." Peter, with his heart changed by the Holy Spirit of God so as to confess Jesus as the Christ was the foundation of the church. Jesus entrusted this authority to him like what we saw with Eliakim in the first reading. Peter, as first among equals, shared this authority with the other disciples. Peter, the Rock, was the leader of the church among the Jews, the people to whom God first granted the understanding of the mystery of the church, before Paul spread the message to the Gentiles.

Peter clarified this meaning in the Book of First Peter. Peter said, "you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Although Peter used the word "lithos" for stone, he stated how the individual stones are built up into a holy priesthood of believers "through Jesus Christ." The church is the collection of spiritual rocks that are built on the "petra" or foundation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16) through whom is the only way to eternal life (John 14:6).

Saint Paul used a similar analogy in explaining how God empowered him as the leader and builder of the church among the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:1), in the same way that Peter was the builder of the church among the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Paul said, "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). In Ephesians Paul clarified how Jesus intended the church to interpret this passage by pointing out that our faith has "been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20).

Paul used the symbolism of Jesus as the Rock or foundation in First Corinthians:

1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a

spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

When Paul said the "they were drinking from the spiritual rock" and "the rock was Christ" (v. 4) both times he used the word "petra." Jesus was the foundation stone, the One Who provided sustenance to the Hebrews escaping from the Pharaoh.

Jesus Himself explained the necessity of a sure foundation in Luke Chapter 6:

47 Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: 48 he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:47-49)

When Jesus said, "he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock" (v. 48) the word in the original was "petra" The giant rock that was rolled to seal Jesus' tomb was a "petra" (Matthew 27:60). Peter **was** one of the foundational stone**s** (the apostles and prophets), but Jesus **is** the Chief Cornerstone, the Foundation of the Church. "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

A second significant point in the text arises from when Jesus said that He "will give you the keys of the kingdom in heaven," and that whatever he bound on earth would be bound in heaven and whatever was loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. Scripture is clear that the keys of the kingdom are salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. 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. Peter and the other apostles were being sent out with authority to preach the Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), which would be the entry point of faith. In a certain sense, they were being commissioned to open the doors of the Kingdom of God to others by their obedience in proclaiming the Good news and making disciples. We then see Peter is Acts 2:14-40 fulfilling this call by preaching a message of repentance and salvation in Jesus Christ. This is in line with Jesus' teaching when He 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). Later, Jesus instructed the group of ten disciples (eleven less Thomas)

gathered together in the upper room after His resurrection that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved. The keys of the Kingdom were being entrusted to this group of men who had been with Jesus in a personal way. They were going to be His hands and feet in the world from now on. And the story of the Gospel continues to penetrate lives because we are all commissioned to be his ambassadors, representing God's love and truth to the world with our lives and our proclamation of the Good news (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Finally, Jesus said, "the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (v. 18c), meaning that all of the evil will not be able to overcome the God-ordained movement of the church. The church is on the offensive, storming the "gates of hell" as was so symbolically portrayed by this incident happening at Caesarea Philippi. This is an important statement that no matter how awful the world may become, the power of Satan will never destroy God's church. We can rest in the fact that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33, 1 Corinthians 15:57) and through Him alone we can find the power to continue His commission of making disciples and teaching (Matthew 28:16-20).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel reading, Jesus asked his disciples a very pointed question: "Who do you say that I am?" At some point, each of us has to answer this question. How does Peter's response resonate with you? Is this the foundation you are building your life on? If so, how does your life reflect this? If not, what foundation are you building your life on? Would you like Peter's response to be your response, too? You can pause and ask God to change the direction of your life so that you can build on the Chief Cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

2. In the Gospel lesson Jesus said, "the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (v. 18c), meaning that all of the evil will not be able to overcome the God-ordained movement of the church. Where do you see this passage intersecting with your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-16-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The readings this week all follow a central theme, God's revelation of the mystery of salvation being given to the Gentiles in addition to the Jews. The Jews were always God's chosen method of bringing light to the Gentile world. We will see that in the first reading from Isaiah 56 and the second reading from Romans 11. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we will see Jesus' interaction with a Gentile woman and how her faith in Jesus' ability to heal her daughter provided a glimpse into God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. Chapter 56 is in the closing section of the Book of Isaiah, where God revealed important spiritual truths including the importance of His Word (Isaiah 55:10-11) as well as some further information about His plan of salvation for the Gentiles. In the section immediately prior to today's reading, God outlined His promises that He made to the

covenant people, the Jews. As you read, note that verses 2-5 which were skipped in the mass lectionary have been added in order to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of the text.

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD, "Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed. 2 How blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who takes hold of it; Who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil. 3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people." Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, 5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, And a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. 6 Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant; 7 Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7)

Several important points arise from Isaiah's prophecy. First, in light of the previous chapters in which God recounted His promises to the Jews, He announced a charge to them to maintain a clear conscience. In verse one He tells them to "preserve justice and do righteousness" because His salvation would come in the future and at that point His righteousness would be revealed. For a Jew, keeping the Law meant honoring the sabbath as well as "keep[ing] [their] hands from doing any evil" (v. 3).This is a calling to all believers to walk uprightly with the knowledge of salvation that they possess, whether Jew or Gentile. This is clear because in verse three God began to lay out further details about his plan of salvation for the Gentiles. Second, everyone would be welcomed into God's kingdom who walked in faith with God including the Gentiles (foreigners) or those who felt unwelcome in it such as the childless eunuchs. Large families were considered a blessing of God in the Jewish world. God said that he would "give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off" (v. 5c) and that he would "bring [them] to [His] holy mountain and make them joyful in [His] house of prayer" (v. 7). Finally, God revealed through Isaiah that anyone could join the Jewish community of believers and partake in their worship and celebration of God. He said, "[His] house [would] be called a house of prayer for **all** peoples" (v. 7c, emphasis added).

Although Isaiah provided additional information about God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through the Jews this was not a new concept in the Bible. Even in the very first Book of the Bible God spoke about salvation coming to all people through Abraham the father of all believers. God told Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:18). King David said some three hundred years earlier, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, And all the families of the nations will worship before You" (Psalm 22:27). Earlier in Isaiah's record he provided insight into the ultimate method that God would use to bring salvation to the whole world. He said regarding the future Messiah Jesus, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them" (Isaiah 9:2). Though the Jews were always a light that pointed to salvation through faith in God, the ultimate light would be the Lord Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we turn to the second reading, we will find additional information about God's plan of salvation to the Gentiles that came through the Jews. In this portion of Romans, Paul uses an analogy of an olive tree to describe God's saving ways. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, some of the original branches (the Jews) had been broken off. This grieved Paul to no end. But this made room for the wild branch (that of the Gentiles) to be grafted into the pure olive tree (the Life of Christ). Our hope is in God's ability to take what is broken and make it whole again (both Jews and Gentiles). And if He is able to do that at the macro-level, can we not trust Him to do that at the micro-level of our lives?

As you read please note that a large section of the text was omitted in the mass reading (verses 16-28 shown separated from the rest) but have been included in order to provide the full meaning of the text.

Second Reading:

13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

16 If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? 25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery–so that you will not be wise in your own estimation–that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." 27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Romans 11:13-32)

The big idea in the reading is the revelation of the "mystery" (v. 25a) that God has allowed the Jews to be disobedient to Him for a period of time such that the Gentile believers may be "ingrafted" into God's plan of salvation. Paul affirmed that as the "apostle to the Gentiles" (v. 13) he hoped that through his ministry to them that he may motivate his fellow Jews to trust in Jesus (v. 14). He said that at some future date that all of Israel would be saved (v. 25). As Gentiles without the knowledge of God we are being shown God's mercy during what some commentators refer to as the "church age." The church was something that wasn't reveled to the Old Testament Prophets, or even to Jesus' own disciples until close to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. In the Old Testament the Hebrew people were distinct from the surrounding nations because of their Law, culture, food, temple, and their worship practices. In the New Testament, Jesus' vision for the church would be for us to be "in the world, but not of it" (John 17:15-16). In the reading Paul stated how the people of God (both Jews and Gentiles) were now one.

Saint Paul revealed more revelation from God about the mystery of the church. Later in Ephesians, God used the analogy of the love that exists between a man and a woman to show how He loves the church. Paul said that husbands are to "love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it" (Ephesians 5:25). He continued, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32, emphasis added). Paul said more about the mystery of the church:

4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, (Ephesians 3:4-6)

How could God allow the hardness of the Jewish people's hearts and to set them aside until the last Gentile that desired salvation would find faith in Jesus Christ? This is one of the deep mysteries with which Paul was wrestling. The answer, at least partially, is found in the last verse of the second reading. "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all" (v. 32). God loves us so much that He is willing to endure the hardness of the Jews hearts until all of us Gentiles that desire salvation find faith in Jesus Christ. The point that Paul makes throughout his letters and the passage in Romans in particular is that we can trust God's mercy, even if we don't fully understand His ways.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In today's Gospel lesson remember that at this point the church age was still hidden and God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through faith in Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross wasn't in view yet. The context of the Gospel reading is just after Peter (and Jesus) walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:25-31) that we studied last week. After Jesus had calmed the wind and the waves they crossed the lake and came to the region of Gennesaret (14:34) located on the northwest shore of the lake. A series of events preceding this caused Jesus to leave this Jewish region. This included the unwillingness of the Jewish people to repent (Matthew 11:20-24), the rejection of Jesus by the people in his own hometown of Nazareth (Matthew 13:53-58), and the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-10). Jesus' movement to this region spoke symbolically of the future ministry to the Gentiles that some of the disciples would have.

We drop in on the story of the Canaanite woman right Matthew highlighted the hardness of the hearts of the Pharisees. This story provides a sharp contrast between the Jewish religious leaders' response to Jesus and the non-religious Gentile response to Jesus. In the previous verses, Jesus was grilled by the Pharisees and then He shows them to be the frauds that they are. Then in contrast, we read a story about the real journey of faith.

Gospel Reading:

21 Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." 23 But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." 24 But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" 26 And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 27 But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once. (Matthew 15:21-28)

The Gentile woman was from a group of people who had always troubled Israel. The Canaanites were first mentioned in the Bible way back in Genesis Chapter 10 (v. 18). They were among the people groups that God promised to drive out during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt (see Exodus 33:2 and 34:11). They were a people that in Old Testament times lived in the lowland regions west of the Jordan River. Mark called her "a Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race" (Mark 7:26), indicating that she was a Greek. Jews had always been separated from the Greeks (or Gentiles) although the Jews were immersed in a thoroughly Greek culture. As the story plays out the Gentile woman called out to Jesus by using a respectful title, "Lord, Son of David" (v.22) and one which elicited that she had some understanding of Jesus. She called Jesus by the name "Lord" three times. The word "Lord" means master and the one using the term would be implying their submission to His authority in their life. Certainly, she had heard about his healing powers, but now she used a title that was reserved for the Messiah. She was a persistent woman, and Jesus' disciples implored him to send her away "because she keeps shouting at us" (v. 23c). Then Jesus addressed her and said that His ministry was only to the Jews (v. 24). Next, the woman bowed down before Jesus and He used a metaphor and told her that "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27). The "children's bread" referred to God's covenant people the Jews. This meant that since she wasn't a Jew she was not technically Jesus' first **priority** during his short earthly ministry, which was to the Jews, not to the Gentiles. Her answer to him was very surprising and was an indication of

the faith that she had in the Lord Jesus. "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). Jesus rewarded her faith by immediately healing her daughter. The Bible is clear that God commends those with faith, He is a "rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). The Gentile woman was rewarded by having her daughter healed. One can only imagine what became of the woman afterwards since Jesus absolutely made a tremendous impression upon her.

What do the readings this week mean to us in our lives? First, God emphasizes the necessity of faith in the perfect, finished work or Jesus Christ for all people, whether Jew or Gentile, and is no respecter of persons. He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). God provided the plan of salvation through Jesus and made this available to everyone. "For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "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" (John 3:16). God said "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; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" Romans 10:9-10).

Second, we should love and respect the Jews who although their hearts are hardened are the ones who brought salvation to us through Jesus Christ. We should "not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either" (Romans 11:20). God has made Israel to be a blessing to the world, and all the way back in Genesis He cautioned us about how we should treat them. He said, "And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Finally, with the privilege of faith we also have great responsibility to share with everyone the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Jesus didn't give us many commands when He left but did leave a clear message about what should be our priority in life. This is called 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).

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Reflection Questions

1. How do you personally respond to God's call to salvation?

- Have you made a decision to accept His call and be grafted into the life of Christ?
- What does God's inclusion of Gentiles into the salvation story tell you about His character and heart?
- How does God's longing to see all people saved encourage you to reach out to others with His good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

2. How does the faith of the Canaanite woman challenge or affirm you in your own faith journey? Have you seen anyone model this type of faith? Who is God using you to encourage with this type of faith?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 8-9-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of First Kings in which Elijah hides in a cave and waits to hear from the voice of God. Then continue the study in Romans in the second reading and conclude with yet another continuing study in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus and Peter walk on water.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of First Kings where Elijah was fleeing from Queen Jezebel who had threatened his life (1 Kings 19:1-2) after he had killed the Prophets of Baal at the conclusion of a contest with them. Elijah had fled first to Beersheba where an angel of the Lord had fed him leading him on a forty day journey to Mt. Horeb "the mountain of God" (19:8). The reading skipped the ending of verse 9 and all of verse 10 that provides important contextual information for the eventual revelation of God's message to Elijah. Therefore these verses are included in our study.

First Reading:

9 Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 11 So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9-13)

Elijah incorrectly thought that he was the only remaining follower of the Lord (v. 10, "I alone am left"). God corrected his false belief later in the chapter and told him that seven thousand believers remained (1 Kings 19:18, see below). It is important to note that Elijah had just come from a very important spiritual victory. Sometimes after a victory, we can be the most vulnerable. So God, in His mercy, meets Elijah in his place of need in a cave at Mt. Horeb. This is the same mountain where God met Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. Now hundreds of years later Elijah, another great leader, met God in an unexpected way. God caused the wind, earthquake, and fire, but these things weren't His voice. No, these fearful things brought about by the fall of Adam (Genesis 3) were not the Word of God for which Elijah was waiting, this came in the sound of a "gentle blowing," or as rendered in some versions "a tiny whispering sound" (v. 12). When Elijah heard this he knew that this was God's voice. This is what Elijah needed to continue on.

Some life lessons through which we can learn from Elijah's interaction with God as follows, God may be wanting to get our attention in the same way. First, God may be asking us, "What are you doing her?" This is a question of purpose, personal meaning and identity. Only God can give us the answer to this question. Second, God may be telling us where to find Him. In Elijah's case it was geographical, however in our case it may be more of a state of our heart, seeking Him where He has chosen to reveal Himself – His Word, the Bible. Finally, He may be showing us Who He is. Surprisingly enough, God chose to reveal Himself in a still, small voice. Our world shouts, but God whispers. What can we do to quiet ourselves and listen?

This is how the story ended with God giving Elijah specific instructions and information.

14 Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 15 The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; 16 and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. 17 "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. 18 "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:14-18)

Elijah thought that he was alone when in fact God revealed that there were at least 7,000 in Israel that had remained true to Him. Oftentimes we may feel all alone as believers in Jesus Christ, especially when we find ourselves in circumstances around nonbelievers for extended periods of time.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading, Saint Paul likely felt that way as he poured out his heart to his fellow Jews who stubbornly resisted the Gospel message. The reading this week is a continuation of the previous weeks study in Romans. Romans chapter 9 through 11 mark a section in which Saint Paul outlines Israel's past (chapter 9), present (chapter 11), and future (chapter 12).

Second Reading:

1 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 9:1-5)

The big idea is that Paul was a Jew, "my kinsmen according to the flesh" (v. 3) born into the tribe of

Benjamin (Philippians 3:5) and is greatly distressed that as a Jew his fellow Israelites haven't believed in the Messiah Jesus. We can learn several things from this passage. First, may we be grieved over those we care about who don't know Jesus Christ. Are we willing to make even minor sacrifices to reach the lost with the Good News of the Kingdom? Second, this section about the Jewish people reminds us that God chose this specific people group to be a blessing to the rest of the world. It was through the Jews that God established His covenants (relational commitments), gave the Law (moral, dietary, religious and code of conduct), set up a place and avenue for worship (the responding to God's worth), and the promises (God's record of faithfulness). Their lineage includes the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), King David, and ultimately Jesus. Finally, Paul emphasis who the Person of Jesus Christ is: God over all forever praised. This is clear evidence that the early church had a solid sense of who Christ is (Christology) which includes His deity. His followers worshiped Him as God, and we would be wise to do the same.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is a continuation of the study in previous weeks that began in Matthew with the Jesus' parables in Chapter 13. Here Jesus once again proves by performing mighty miracles that He is God.

Gospel Reading:

22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24 But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" (Matthew 14:22-33)

As we saw the forces of nature in the first reading, the wind and the waves caused a frightful condition on the lake. This scene then became even more frightening when the disciples saw a man walking across the water (v. 26), evidently not recognizing the person as Jesus until He called out to them (v. 27). By this point, similar to what had happened to Elijah, they knew that they had heard the voice of God (v. 32).

There are actually three miracles in the story. First, Jesus Himself walking on that water (v. 25). Second, Peter's walking on the water through Jesus' power (v. 29). Finally, the calming of both the wind and the waves (v. 32). Notice how Jesus sought solitude away from the crowds (v. 22). Jesus often did this right before he performed a might miracle. He did this just before He fed the crowd that we studied last week. He wanted to be by Himself to pray to His Heavenly Father. This is a good reminder to us that if Jesus Himself needed to pray, how much more do we need this time with the Father?

Peter was the disciples with courage. We can sometimes look at this story of Peter sinking in the water as a show of fear, but he was the only one that got out of the boat! Sometimes God grows our faith by allowing turbulent circumstances and impossible odds. These are opportunities for us to turn our attention to Christ and trust Him to provide for us in the midst of the storm. I bet that Peter had a great time talking about his experience of walking on the water. We too will enjoy talking to others about how God has enabled us to do what we thought was impossible.

Reflection Questions

1. We read in the Gospel lesson how Jesus enabled Peter to walk on water, and also how as Peter's faith grew weaker his ability began to fail. Faith is a key element in accepting God's empowerment in our lives. How has God empowered you to "walk on water" in a certain circumstance?

2. In the Gospel lesson, Peter experienced the exhilaration of walking on water holding the hand of Jesus. If you were going through a time when your faith is being tested, how can Peter's story of walking on water encourage you to keep looking to Christ? Second, how might this experience help you to take a more radical approach in your outreach to the lost in your own life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-26-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the Old Testament reading that describes King Solomon's prayer for wisdom. Our New Testament reading describes God's vision for each follower to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus. This is truly wise living. In the Gospel lesson, we continue with more of Jesus' teaching on parables from last week. He provides short stories of wise people who valued the Kingdom of Heaven above all else and inherited life eternal.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context for this story is after the death of King David. Israel was in its "golden era" having

subdued its enemies and established itself as a nation. Solomon was David's son by Bathsheba and succeeded David on the throne. We catch a glimpse of his heart as he begins his reign over Israel.

First Reading:

5 In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you." 6 Then Solomon said, "You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7 Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. 9 So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" 10 It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. 11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, 12 behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. (1 Kings 3:5-12)

These verses show us the beginning steps of King Solomon. Some important observations include:

- God came to Solomon in a dream
- God invited Solomon to ask Him for whatever he wished
- Solomon recognized God's great loving-kindness (fiercely loyal love) before answering
- Solomon also recognized his finiteness and sense of inadequacy for the important role that he was being placed in
- Solomon asked for an understanding heart to judge the people of Israel and to discern between good and evil
- God granted this request and blessed him with wisdom

If you know the rest of the story, you may be confused with how a person could be granted a wise and discerning heart and yet end up being led astray by all of the women (700 of them) he was

married to (1 Kings 11:3). I wonder if his great wisdom came through the school of hard knocks. For at the end of his life he confesses: "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). No matter how much wealth, power and status, the wisest man on earth concludes that fearing God is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

You may not be a king, but we can all come to God and ask Him for wisdom. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." We all have roles in life that are challenging. We can follow Solomon's lead and recognize God's fiercely loyal love and our inadequacy. This should lead us with humility and desperation before the true King of kings as we ask our Heavenly Father for what we really need: wisdom.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the New Testament, Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, which is a continuation of what we read last week. Paul is in the middle of declaring the victory that believers have through Christ. But the victory comes through the back door of recognizing our weakness as humans. This echoes King Solomon's prayer for wisdom in the earlier reading. For it is in our weakness that we find help from the Holy Spirit, who is interceding for us according to the will of God the Father (Romans 8:27).

Second Reading:

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

This passage, in its context, casts an inspiring and hopeful vision for followers of Christ. For it declares that God uses all things for His good purposes. While not all things that happen in this life

are good, God is able to use every circumstance (pleasurable and painful) to accomplish His predestined will: to conform us to image of His Son. He wants us to look like Christ. That's what this life is all about. That is God's vision for us as His followers. The question for us is, how badly do we want His vision for our lives? Are we willing to let God conform us to the image of His Son and work all things together for good, or are we wanting to just "get enough of God" in order to go to heaven when we die? There is a foundational condition for having all things work together for good: this comes to one who loves God and allows Him to work out His good purposes in his or her life. What this implies is trust and surrender to God's bigger purposes. He knows what is best for us. Someday we will agree wholeheartedly with Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel lesson this week we continue with Jesus' teaching to His disciples through parables that we looked at the past two weeks.

Gospel Reading:

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, 46 and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48 and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes." 52 And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old." (Matthew 13:44-52)

Jesus is away from the crowds (Matthew 13:36) and now teaches His disciples in parables, something which He previously did only when the crowds were present. The main subject is the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus paints a few broad brush strokes to entice His followers to continue their costly pursuit of being a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price. In the parable of the hidden treasure the man isn't searching for it, in contrast the man in the parable of the pearl is on an active search to locate valuable peals. Both parables, though, require a sacrifice on the part of the would-be owners of the precious goods. But the sacrifice is insignificant for the joy of obtaining the truly valuable treasure. Jesus is helping us to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is worth every seeming sacrifice that is made in order to walk with Him in this world. Jesus' kingdom is only partially here, and these parables illustrate the great value of this down payment on the full kingdom, the mystery of life eternal.

The apostle Paul understood clearly the surpassing value of a discipleship relationship to Jesus: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Phil. 3:8).

The last illustration of the Kingdom of Heaven is very striking. It is that of a dragnet that is tossed out to catch fish. In the end of the age, the fish will be sorted out. The good will go to containers and the bad will be thrown out. Jesus gives the explanation clearly. The wicked will be sorted out from the righteous and will be thrown into the furnace of fire (referring to a literal Hell). The prospects of an eternity with weeping and gnashing of teeth is almost too much to fathom. But Jesus, in His kindness, gives us insight into eternity. In this life we have a lot of choices to make, but the most important one is where we will spend eternity. Based on our sin, we have only one label that we can claim: wicked. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). We cannot claim the label "righteous," no matter how good we try to be. But Jesus, who was righteous came to give us the label and identity of "righteous" by taking the punishment of our wickedness on the cross and giving us His righteousness. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). So while we don't deserve the label of righteous, we can choose to have it, if we will receive God's gift of eternal life. It's a gift, though. It doesn't count until you receive it. Have you placed your faith in God's gift of eternal life through Christ? Are you counting on this for your salvation?

If so, you are a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said that each one who is following Him into His Kingdom brings out treasures that are new and old. This means that we have a growing testimony of God's valuable work in our lives. We can speak of the current work that He is doing and the past work that He has done. We are cooperating with His vision to conform us into the image of His Son, for we know that the Son is our most valuable treasure indeed.

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Reflection Questions

1. What does it really mean to be a disciple of the "Kingdom of Heaven?" What are one or two ways in which this played out in your life this week?

2. What "sacrifices" have you made to be a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven? How do these parables help you to know that it is worth it?

3. How does the story of Solomon asking for wisdom illustrate the parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price? In what areas do you want God to help you become wise and discerning about your own life and pursuits? Spend some time in prayer, asking Him for His perspective and wisdom for your life. Let Him know that you want to surrender to His vision for conforming you to the image of His Son.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-19-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open by briefly looking at the responsorial Psalm from the first reading and then move onto the second reading in which we study some deep truths from Paul's Letter to the Romans. Finally, we move to the Gospel lesson in which we continue Jesus' teaching of the parables in Matthew 13 that we looked at last week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. The main idea from the reading is given in the responsorial Psalm that follows this reading. This is from Psalm Chapter 86 and we have included verses 5-7.

First Reading:

WIS 12:13, 16-19

There is no god besides you who have the care of all,

that you need show you have not unjustly condemned.

For your might is the source of justice;

your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all.

For you show your might when the perfection of your power is disbelieved;

and in those who know you, you rebuke temerity.

But though you are master of might, you judge with clemency,

and with much lenience you govern us;

for power, whenever you will, attends you.

And you taught your people, by these deeds,

that those who are just must be kind;

and you gave your children good ground for hope

that you would permit repentance for their sins.

First Reading (Responsorial Psalm):

5 For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

6 Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; And give heed to the voice of my supplications!

7 In the day of my trouble I shall call upon You, For You will answer me. (Psalm 86:5-7)

God forgives those who call upon Him (v. 5), listen to their prayers (v. 6), and answers them during times of distress (v. 7). It is good to know that God is above our problems (He is not wringing His hands in worry), yet He is not aloof to us in our neediness. There are two terms that help us to understand these important facets of God's character: transcendence (God is above His creation and rules over it) and immanence (God draws near to His creation and desires to be with us). These few verses teach us that He not only has the power to help us, He is interested in answering us; God's transcendence and immanence. What an amazing God who is powerful and uses His power in good and loving ways. His loving power is most clearly seen in the cross, as He gave His Son as a sacrifice for our sin debt.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading also has a theme of prayer, only this passage teaches that the Holy Spirit Himself is praying for us. This passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans reinforces God's transcendence and immanence as well.

Second Reading:

26 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; 27 and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27).

In this reading, Saint Paul revealed a marvelous mystery about God the Holy Spirit. He said that God the Holy Spirit prays on our behalf (v. 26), and intercedes for us (v. 27). God is transcendent above the believer, knowing what our real needs are and working towards His end goal of glorifying Himself in our transformation. Yet, He also comes alongside us as the Helper who lives inside of us (John 14:6), praying with "groanings" too deep for words. He is not a cosmic policeman trying to enforce the rules. Instead this passage teaches that God the Holy Spirit is moved by our helpless estate and He desires to accomplish the Father's will in our lives. He prays for things that we ourselves may not value yet and may not see need to be accomplished in our lives. Maybe one important take away is to begin to listen to God's heart for our lives as we read the Bible and see if He may be answering His prayers for us when we don't see Him answering our prayers the way we desire. God's vision for our lives is much bigger than our small hopes and dreams. Saint John of the Cross said it well:

How will a person

Brought to birth and nurtured in a world of small horizons,

Rise up to you Lord

If you do not raise him by your hand which made him?

The text doesn't say whether or not God changes our existing prayers to coincide with His will, or if He makes new petitions for us. Regardless, each person of the Holy Trinity intercedes with the other on our behalf. This is extremely important because Paul said, "we do not know how to pray as we should" (v. 27). We know from Jesus' prayer in John Chapter 17 that He prays for us. Because this prayer is recorded in Scripture, we can be certain that Jesus continues ministering on our behalf. Later on in Romans 8:34, Paul assures us that "Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was

raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us." Again, God's transcendence (knowing what we need) and immanence (being with us in our need) are important truths that should warm our hearts in our daily lives. We are not alone. God is with us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson this week includes three parables from the continuing study in Matthew 13. The first is the parable of the weeds and the tares and this provides some extremely important insights into the nature of the kingdom, both in the near term and looking on into eternity. It also gives important insight into those who will be locked out of the kingdom. Like the parable of the sower we looked at last week, Jesus went on to explain the meaning to His disciples. The second parable is the parable of the mustard seed, and the final one covered this week is the parable of the leaven.

Some specific cautions are in order about the interpretation of these particular parables as well as that genre in general. First, each parable must not be construed in such a way as to make it "walk on all fours" by taking terms literally when used within without fully considering the context. For example, though the word "leaven" (Matthew 13:33) is almost universally a negative term in the Bible, for example the "leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6), it is also a very good thing when used in the context of baking bread. A second word in the reading today about which we take note of is the word "birds." In the Old Testament many, but not all birds were unclean animals and therefore bad in the Jewish context. John, the author of Revelation, used this association when he described the future religious and civil empire of the Antichrist Mystery Babylon as the home for every "unclean and hateful bird" (Revelation 18:2). However, as we will read in a moment, Jesus used this word to describe the rapid growth and size of His kingdom, not necessarily the nature of the kingdom (although some will debate this point). A large and fast growing kingdom is a good thing, though we need to take caution in believing that everyone who appears to be inside the kingdom may not be what they appear, as we will see in the parable of the wheat and the tares. We have to focus upon the main point of the parable and lay aside the word studies unless they change the meaning of the main point.

Taking the example of a modern parable, in our day and age we know what we mean when we say, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." We would never say this means that people should literally not throw stones while living inside that type of house, whether or not that was true. Instead, what we mean is that people should not criticize others for having the same faults that they have. That is the main point of this modern parable, which brings us to a second caution

about interpreting parables. Parables in the First Century Jewish context were used to prove one (or sometimes two) main ideas by "laying alongside" a story that was easy for the hearers in an oral culture to grasp. Although there is usually only one main **meaning** in a parable there are multiple **applications**. With these things in mind let's read the Gospel lesson.

Gospel Reading:

24 Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. 26 But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. 27 The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' 28 "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' 29 "But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"31 He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES." 33 He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened." 34 All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. 35 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES; I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD." 36 Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." 37 And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, 38 and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. 40 "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, 42 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:24-43)

Jesus taught the crowds and the disciples by giving them three parables. First, let's examine the parable of the wheat and the tares. This is a very important parable that provides essential insights

both into the nature of Jesus' holy kingdom as well as some into the nature of the place where those excluded from it will be assigned for eternity. Many points arise from Jesus' teaching, here are a few.

- The picture provided of the separation of the wheat and the tares is what will occur in Revelation Chapter 17 at the end of the Great Tribulation when believers will be welcomed into Jesus' kingdom reign on earth and all unbelievers will be removed.
- There are two literal destinations, heaven and hell. Hell is a real, literal place which is eternal and everyone that doesn't go to heaven goes there. Jesus taught more about hell than He did about heaven. In Matthew 13 he clarifies by saying, "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (vv. 41-42).
  The author of Hebrews said, "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this to face judgment" (Heb. 9:27).
- The weed plants grow, seemingly out of control, alongside the wheat during their natural lives. But when the weeds die they are subjected to the control of the Master who rounds them up to be burned. It is at this point that their true nature becomes evident. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21).
- The nature of the seeds is different. Only God knows which one will grow into a wheat plant, and another into a weed. The doctrine of predestination is tied directly to God's foreknowledge. Romans 8:29 says, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified." God wishes that none would perish but all would come to the knowledge of eternal life (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9).
- Angels serve God in a unique ministry of gathering souls, bringing them to their rightful eternal destinations. The destination of the person's soul being transported is known to the angels at this point, even before God affords them justice through a trial. (Revelation 20:12). For "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27).
- The "church age" is a mystery, one not seen even by the disciples and Old Testament Prophets (Ephesians 5:32).

Second, Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed (vv. 31-32). Anyone that has ever seen a mustard seed knows of its tiny size, but how could a mustard seed grow into a tree and what does that have to do with the kingdom of heaven? The plant becomes so large that even birds can lodge in it,

something that no normal mustard plant could ever hope to achieve. The kingdom of heaven is **like** a mustard seed, and when it is full grown it becomes so large that it brings refuge to people in the entire world.

Finally, Jesus told the parable of the leaven. As we said in the introduction, although leaven was equivalent to sin in the minds of a Jewish audience, the context makes it clear that this wasn't the meaning that Jesus intended. Instead, what Jesus said was that His kingdom would grow and expand in a mysterious way **like** leaven (v. 33) placed in dough. The leaven is hidden in the bread and its work is a mystery. In the same way, the church is a mystery hidden in the world (Ephesians 5:32), and unseen by the Prophets and even the disciples.

What do these parables mean for us today, what are some possible applications? First, since the weeds are not uprooted we are called to be discerning. We must know the Word of God and be willing to provide our testimony, the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15). Second, Christians are called to provide salt and light in their workplaces consisting of a mix of believers and nonbelievers including a variety of other faith groups. Finally, we can take courage in the fact that God will continue to build His kingdom into a large web, regardless of persecution and the political happenings of the age. The Word will spread as leaven through dough, and the tiny seed will become as large as a gigantic tree.

Reflection Questions

1. The parables in Matthew 13 give us teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven. Since Jesus was from heaven, He speaks with authority of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. His goal was to transform people from being citizens of earth to citizens of heaven, even while living here on earth. How does Jesus' vision for Kingdom living compare and contrast with your present vision for life? Where is your life in line with His vision and where is your life out of line with His vision? Spend some time talking to Him about what you would like to see Him do to move you closer to His vision.

2. The first two readings pointed out God's transcendence (He is above creation) and immanence (He draws near to His creation). What difference does God's transcendence and immanence make in our everyday lives? How might you (and others) know that you are growing in internalizing these truths?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-12-2020



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 55. The chapter opens with an invitation for everyone, even Gentiles (Isaiah 55:5) to partake of the benefits earned by the Suffering Servant in chapter 53 whom we know

was the Lord Jesus. Isaiah said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost" (v. 1). Isaiah then went on to say some of the most often quoted verses from the Old Testament. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Isaiah explained God's invitation to salvation to everyone as well as an important insight into the nature of God.

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

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

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

now" (v.22).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, pause for a moment and imagine what it would have been like to sit at the feet of Jesus and not only hear his teaching but also have it privately explained to you. That is what happened in the Gospel lesson from Matthew 13 in Jesus' famous parable of the soils. The context is just after the Pharisees scolded Jesus' because his disciples had picked and eaten from standing grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2). Jesus used this occasion to proclaim his Lordship, saying, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (v. 8). He then went on to offend the Pharisees even more by healing a man with a withered hand, an action that caused them to "[conspire] against Him, as to how they might destroy Him" (v. 14).

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

Gospel Reading:

1 That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2 And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. 3 And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear." 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT

UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; 15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.' 16 But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. 18 Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20 The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:1-23)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even though we work alongside the other types of soil, as believers in Jesus Christ we can rest assured that God will accomplish the good works that He began within us (Philippians 1:6). Our good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ. Though some will produce more than others (as we

saw in the parable), each believer **will** produce something precious in the eyes of the Lord. As we saw in the first reading it's important to act upon the information that we have been provided before it's too late.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-05-2020

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah was one of the twelve Minor Prophets, a term that indicates the size of their writings in contrast to the larger Books written by the Major Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Zechariah wrote during the exile of the Jews to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem with Zerrubbabel, also known as Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8) the leader of the tribe of Judah. One of the things for which Zechariah is known is the prophecy of the flying scroll (Zechariah 5:1-11). This message symbolized the Word of God that had been disobeyed by Israel and

the moral components which were also broken by the entire world. The message called for judgment according to God's righteous rule. The context of the reading for today is during the reign of the Persian King Darius some two years before the Jews rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. In Chapter 8 Zechariah had prophesied about what we know today as the return of the Lord Jesus to Jerusalem. He said, "Thus says the LORD, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain'" (Zechariah 8:3). Chapter 9 opens with a prophecy against the nations surrounding Israel followed by a pronouncement that God would deliver His people. "But I will camp around My house because of an army, Because of him who passes by and returns; And no oppressor will pass over them anymore, For now I have seen with My eyes" (Zechariah 9:8).

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

First Reading:

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

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

The war about which Zechariah was speaking is the war that will come with the appearance of the man known in Scripture as the Antichrist. Saint Paul said, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This "man of sin" will fill the world's vacuum for a leader and will seize power by intrigue (Daniel 11:21). We can take comfort in knowing that one day Jesus

will return to the earth to usher in worldwide peace and bring in an era of justice. When we see wars and rumors of war all around us, this does not take God by surprise. He is waiting for the perfect timing to bring His Son back to rule and reign on the earth. Second, we can rest in the fact that although Zechariah probably didn't understand the prophecy that he wrote, he faithfully recorded it in the Scriptures. We can trust that the prophecies such as this one from Zechariah provide important, after-the-fact, confirmation of the accuracy of God's Word, even if they are hard to understand before the events have played out. This gives us confidence to follow God's Word, because we know that it is not manmade, it is supernatural.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. 12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh– 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:9-13)

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

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

It is important for us to pause here and contemplate what Paul said regarding the calling of believers towards holy living. "[F]or if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (v. 13). His teaching on this matter took the form of a set of "if then" conditional statements. **If** a person who doesn't have the Spirit of God lives according to the natural flesh, which of course is the only direction they know to take, **then** they will die. But **if** you who are indwelled by the Holy Spirit (are born from again, born from above by the Holy Spirit, John 3:3) **then** you will have empowerment from God's Holy Spirit to live according to the purposes of the Spirit, who inherently has life. Jesus is the empowering force that lives within us through God's Holy Spirit, enabling us to turn from the natural inclinations of our sinful flesh and towards the things of the Spirit. It's not so much that God doesn't like unholy living and punishes it with death, it's more about the natural course of consequences that are inherent in the universe that God designed. He pleads with people to choose life, but often times we choose death (Deuteronomy 30:19). Paul makes a striking case for the ongoing growth of believers to become more and more like Christ, from the inside out, because we have a new relationship of grace with His Spirit who "teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness" and calls us to righteous living (Titus 2:12).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

Jesus revealed several very important spiritual truths in this passage:

- God has given Jesus complete sovereign control over the earth.
- The only Person with a true understanding of God the Father is God the Son AND those to whom God the Son has revealed Himself.

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

Romans 8:16-17: 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

1 John 2:3-11: 3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_07-05-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-28-2020



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is more strange and mysterious goings on of Elijah's replacement, Elisha. Today's reading is just after Elisha's miraculous replenishment of the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1 – 7). In the reading, we see yet another of Elijah's great miracles, the birth of a child to a childless

Shunammite woman whose husband was very old. This was in repayment to her for the many kindnesses that she had done for him (2 Kings 4:1 – 13). We know from the text that follows, this miracle child would later die and be miraculously resurrected through another miracle (2 Kings 4:32 – 35).

First Reading:

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

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

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

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

Th big idea here is that God is a God of miracles. God sees the larger picture and fills people's needs even without their asking. Although God does desire for us to ask to fill our needs (James 4:2), He is able to go above and beyond to provide even the things which we don't ask for because we think that they are too big for God to provide. This helps us to persist through times of persecution and

suffering. We can be thankful to God for giving us these vivid reminders through the scriptural writings of those believers who went before us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

In the reading, we learn much about the Christian life. We identify with Christ through our water baptism (v. 3). We see a contrast between the old self (v. 6), and our new self who is no longer a slave to sin (v. 6b). This fundamental transformation is brought about through the conversion of our soul. Our dead soul was symbolically buried with Christ at our baptism (v. 3), while our new self came to life when we became united to Christ through faith (v. 8, Ephesians 2:8-9). The big idea is

that as believers we are united with Jesus. Our lost souls were united in Jesus' death for us. Then we were united with Jesus and given a new soul through His resurrection from the dead. These truths are vividly expressed through the act of water baptism which symbolizes a believer's death to the world and resurrection to the newness of life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

Gospel Reading:

Verses before today's reading:

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

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

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

"Jesus brought not peace / but a sword."

"Jesus pits man / against father."

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

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

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

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

"People receive your Gospel message / receives Me."

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

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

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

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Reflection Questions

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-21-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about suffering and persecution, first

from the Prophet Jeremiah, then from Saint Paul and Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

Jeremiah was quite graphic in his lament, showing that he could be brutally honest with God about how he felt and what he was experiencing. He felt persecuted by his enemies and realized that even his friends had turned against him, waiting for him to mess up. Jeremiah was in a very, very difficult

place, and could have relieved his suffering by denouncing the LORD and His ways. But he stood firm in his convictions, banking his life on the justice of God to prevail. These are some of the things that Jeremiah knew were true about God:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

This reading is set in the context of explaining the power of the Good News, which is that we can be free from the law of sin and death (Romans 6-8). Instead of feeling like paupers in the throne room of the King, Christians can bask in the lavish grace given by God. Paul carefully lays out the contrast between Adam's one sin, which affects all humans and Jesus' free gift of eternal life that overcomes the grave and results in abundant and eternal life. The gift of eternal life is an overwhelming extension of God's heart towards wayward humans. Paul reminds the reader that God sent His righteous Son to die for unrighteous humans. "For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8). God's grace is not stingy or miserly. It is abundant and overflowing.

Second Reading:

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

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

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

results in death. Life with Him and in Him results in eternal life.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul explains that everyone has sinned, even those who lived before the Law was established through Moses. In the days before Moses, people were still reaping the effects of sin, i.e. death, even though God had not given them the Ten Commandments. After Moses and the Law, people were not able to follow God better, they just were more aware of how far short they were missing the mark (Romans 3:23). Paul's point is that either way you slice it (before or after the Law), people have been reaping the tragic effects of sin.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

The cost of discipleship is something about which the Gospel reading deals. One of Jesus' most strategic ways of making a lasting impact in the world was to "disciple" a group of people in His way of life. He spent time with them and taught them about life in the kingdom of God, which was in sharp contrast to life lived under one's own reign. In the Gospel reading for this week, Jesus was preparing his 12 disciples to go out and teach others what they had been taught by Him.
"Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them

out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness "(Matthew 10:1). He gave them specific instructions which would help them to be ambassadors for God's redemptive purposes in the world. He also warned them that the road of discipleship would not be easy. They would be persecuted, questioned, and hated (Matthew 10:17-25). The only way that they could move forward would be to know the truth claims that Jesus' would state in the following verses.

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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