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 Lectionary 31: 03/15/2026



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we begin with the Book of First Samuel, where we will see how God used Samuel to select David as the King of Israel. Then we will move onto Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and finally close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 9 where Jesus miraculously heals a blind man. I also share a story about how God "unblinded" my eyes so I could understand the Bible.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Samuel 16 and records the story of how the Prophet Samuel followed God's instructions in order to select the second King of Israel to replace King Saul whom God had rejected. Immediately after Saul was ordained king, he began disobeying very clear and direct orders from God provided to him by Samuel. In Chapter 15 Samuel gave Saul clear prophesy from the LORD, which said, "Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"

(1Samuel 15:3). Saul gathered his troops together and followed God's command *except* for some rather large details. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (v. 9). Oops. Because of this (and the other times Saul disobeyed) God took the kingdom away from him saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands" (v.11a). The text continued, "And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night" (v. 11b). So Samuel began to make his search for the new king by following God's order to go to Jesse who was David's father. Let's read the text along with all of the other verses surrounding the reading (verses 1-13) in order to understand the entire context.

First Reading:

> *1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you." 4 So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, "Do you come in peace?" 5 He said, "In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'The LORD has not chosen this one either." 10 Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)*

It's interesting that Samuel was afraid of King Saul for even the elders of the city were afraid of him (v. 4). However, the text recorded not only the story and circumstantial details of the search for the future king but also Samuel's thoughts (v. 2). We know of course that God knows all of the secret thoughts of our hearts (Psalm 44:21), and this became even clearer by what we saw in verse 7. "[F]or God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v.7c-ff). God directed the Prophet not to rely upon the outward appearance of the Sons of Jesse; rather, he was to wait for God's confirmation. Regardless of his feelings, Samuel followed God's directions exactly and went to David's hometown of Bethlehem.

First, Samuel surveyed the eldest son, the one whom one might think would be the logical choice from among the large clan of Jesse's sons. Eliab passed before him, and Samuel received no confirmation from God. He proceeded down the line, next with Abinadab, then with Shammah, and so on with the brothers. Nevertheless, God did not confirm any of them, so Samuel asked Jesse if there were any more brothers. Jesse then sent for his youngest son, David (v. 11). The writer of this Scripture then made an interesting observation. After being cautioned not to look at the sons' outward appearance, the writer said immediately upon seeing David, "Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance (v. 12b)! Next, the LORD spoke to Samuel. How this was done, we are not told. He directed Samuel to anoint David as king (v. 12c-ff.). So Samuel followed God's command and anointed David as the new King of Israel (v. 13a).

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, insert your name in place of the "you" in the second word of verse 8, and rephrase it like this. "For Jim, who was

formerly in darkness . . . .

Second Reading:

> *8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12 for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you." (Ephesians 5:8-14)*

Paul said that those who were blind are now able to see (v. 8). Believers are "children of light" (v. 8) as contrasted with children of darkness (or children of the devil) that we will read about in the Gospel lesson. God's children exhibit clear attributes and behaviors that reveal their "light relationship" with their Father God. This is in contrast to the children of darkness who express themselves, many times without even knowing it, as children of the devil. Children of the light express "goodness and righteousness and truth" (v. 9), try "to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (v. 10), "do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness" but instead work to "expose them" (v. 11). God, who is the light, exposes everything, for nothing can be hidden from Him (v. 13). When we come to a point where we believe and agree with what God says about sin then we have followed God's admonition to awaken from our spiritual darkness so that the light of the Word of God may enable God to launch us on a path of growing in love for and knowledge of Him (4.14).

What if we cannot read the Bible and understand what it means, or if we don't have a desire to even attempt to study it? This week, I was contemplating the subject of understanding and coming to the point of loving God's Word. I remember that for the first 35 years of my life, I had an almost impossible time understanding the Bible, which included the New Testament – the Old Testament was a lost cause for me. In fact, when I decided almost 20 years ago to begin reading the Bible, I became angry while reading the Old Testament. I thought that since Jesus was eternal, it would be easy for me to locate Him there in the Old Testament. It just didn't make any sense to me, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate. Something had to happen in order to bring about a change, or I felt like I was going to throw it away and just quit. What made the difference for me? It wasn't a magical, one-time event, but the change came through a series of impressions I received while praying for over a month. I had always prayed to God, but at some point while reading in the New Testament, I came to a point where I prayed something like this again over several weeks. I told God

that I believed that I was a sinner (Romans 3:23) and I deserved punishment for sin (Romans 6:23). I told Him that I believed that Jesus was the only way to heaven (John 14:6) and that I needed His Spirit (John 3:3) to help me to fix the mess that I had made of my life. After a long period of praying to God about this and talking to a few other people about it, I had an eerie encounter with Jesus late one night in my bedroom. In those days, I was living in an upscale condominium in a large city, surrounded by nightlife just a few blocks up Main Street, but I had never felt more alone. I turned off all of the lights and closed the door to my bedroom to pray in silence while lying on my bed. I was frustrated with my inability to live up to my high standards, which included trying to go to church more and party less. After I began praying, I felt Jesus's tangible presence in my dark bedroom that night. In the quiet darkness and with my eyes closed tighter than I thought possible, I extended my hand to Him over the side of the bed. Although I didn't expect my hand to be physically grabbed, for I would have freaked out, I sensed the strong presence of Jesus in the room with me during that instant. From that night onwards, I felt a certain presence of God in my heart, something which is hard for me to put into words. However, a few days later, I noticed I could read the Bible with understanding and without getting angry, as had happened before.

I still have difficulty reading a variety of books, but I have come to enjoy reading the Bible. Last week I downloaded the free version of Saint Augustine's Confession onto my Kindle, thinking that by reading this I would gain some important spiritual insights and become a more godly man. I'm ashamed to say that I couldn't make it through one entire page. The Elizabethan English didn't help, but I'm just not a philosopher. Sometimes we need to understand and accept our limits.

What about you? Do you want a deeper understanding of the Bible? I encourage you to fall to your knees in prayer and ask God to grant both understanding and desire. Is there something standing between you and God? The Scripture says that if you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Scripture also says that we don't have because we don't ask and sometimes when we do ask God doesn't give it to us because we ask with a false motive (James 4:2-3). Everyone, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, must be born from above (John 3:3) in a spiritual sense. If you don't feel that you have the spiritual discernment necessary to read God's Word, just ask Him for it, but ask with the proper motive. This is a motive of desiring to turn from your sin and to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

To summarize, in the first and second readings, we discussed how God "unblinded" people's minds.

First, Samuel was "unblinded" to the identity of the future King of Israel, King David. Second, Paul wrote about how believers are "unblinded" to the reality of sin and even work to expose it. As we move on to the Gospel lesson, we will hear a story about how Jesus healed a blind man, and the man also received spiritual eyesight through his belief in the Lord Jesus. Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath, something that set him further at odds with the hypocritical Pharisees.

A very interesting insight into blindness can be found by studying the context of the Gospel lesson immediately preceding Chapter 8. Here, Jesus had a very difficult conversation with His nemesis, the Pharisees, a conflict that continues into the lesson today in Chapter 9. Jesus pronounced the source of their logic after they began to accuse Him, and He read their minds and told them that they wanted to kill Him. When the Pharisees said that Abraham was their father (John 8:39), Jesus said, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Next, they accused Jesus of having a demon. This led Jesus to make one of His famous "I Am" statements. "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am'" (v. 58). This powerful statement was an outright testimony of Jesus to his deity (see also John 10:30). Finally, in the very last verse of Chapter 8 John wrote, "Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus **hid Himself** and went out of the temple" (v. 59, emphasis added). Notice that Jesus "hid himself," which is another way of looking at it was that he blinded the Pharisees.

As you read the lesson today, notice that Jesus' first action was to "unblind" a blind man. Think of it like this: First, he blinded the *proud* Pharisees, then he "unblinded" a *humble* blind man.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." 6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. 8 Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He*

*kept saying, "I am the one." 10 So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is He?" He *said, "I do not know." 13 They *brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they *said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." 18 The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, 19 and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" 28 They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. 31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. 32 "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 "If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. (John 9:1-41)*

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the blind man's physical condition was the result of his or his parents' sin. Jesus corrected this false belief, saying that God allowed this condition so that he could be healed during this particular event! God is sovereign over every event in history, and He designed this whole affair to show God's glory. Second, the healed, formerly blind man became a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus, and this further deepened His opposition to the Pharisees. One has to like what the formerly blind man said to the Pharisees; it's almost like something we could hear from a smart-talking teenager! "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v.25). After the Pharisees had put him out of the temple (most likely permanently, see his parents warning in v. 22), Jesus came and presented Himself to him, telling the man that he was the Messiah (v. 35, "Son of Man"). The blind man believed, and then worshiped Him (v. 38). Third, the Pharisees alluded to the fact that they held the same belief as the disciples about sin being the cause of physical infirmity (v. 24). Someone that was born blind clearly was a sinner, and sinners, according to the Pharisees, should have nothing to do with worship in the temple. They went on to say, "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" (v. 32).

This powerful story concluded with some of the most intense teaching ever found in the New Testament. Read the conclusion again very carefully.

> *39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

One time I was reading a certain spiritual book called *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles J. Stanford (Zondervan 1984). This book contains many very powerful sections that I underlined and highlighted, probably adding half a pound to the book just from the weight of it all! I found one page so moving and important that I wrote a note at the top and highlighted it in yellow: "Consider this entire page highlighted!" The last three verses of the Gospel lesson are like that – consider the whole section highlighted! Jesus' statement is the essence of the Gospel message. Jesus said that He came into the world to reveal the two groups of people, those on the narrow road to life and those on the broad road to eternal separation from God (Matthew 7:13). In a spiritual sense, there are two types of people, children of God, the Father, and the rest, by default, children of the devil. The children of the light have spiritual vision, but the children of the darkness are spiritually blind. Saint Paul said:

> *3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).*

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter, let's all pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that comes only through the good news of the Gospel, and that we may believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you been "unblinded" to the spiritual truths of the Bible? Consider submitting a brief testimony to the Christians for Christ website: https://christiansforchrist.com/category/articles/testimonies/

2. Frequently, when someone brings up King David, our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality, this is similar to what the Pharisees did to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing, though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before.

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

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

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

3. How could you reach out to someone who hasn't experienced the miraculous gift of God's spiritual healing?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-10-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the readings and discover many important truths about God. We learn about the nature of God and how He is faithful, just and forgiving. We see how we cannot earn our righteous standing before God and how this is a free gift to us through faith in His One and Only provision, Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Chronicles. The context was a time of deep darkness in the Kingdom of Israel. Godly King Josiah, who was a key reformer for the Nation during the decline

of the theocratic kingdom, had just been killed after going into battle against Neco King of Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:23). Following his death, the decline of the kingdom continued with the appointment of Josiah's son Joahaz as King of Judah who was promptly deposed by Neco (2 Chronicles 36:3). At this point, "The king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But Neco took Joahaz his brother and brought him to Egypt" (2 Chronicles 36:4). This king "did evil in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 35:5) and after some 11 years was dragged captive to Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:5a, 6). In the short span of time before the happenings in today's reading two more kings ruled in Judah, first King Jehoiachin (v. 9) and finally Zedekiah who is introduced in the opening verse of the reading.

Note: We included all the intervening verses between 11 and 23 in order to include the full context and lead to the full meaning.

First Reading:

> *2 Chronicles 36:11-23 NAS95 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia–in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah–the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 23 "Thus*

> *says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"*

We see in the reading that Zedekiah continued the wickedness of his forefathers and did not listen to the Lord who spoke through the contemporary Prophet Jeremiah (vv. 11-12). At that time, the Kingdom of Babylon was now the reigning world power and Jeramiah had spoken to Zedekiah about the coming siege by their mighty ruler King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him a message from the Lord saying, "I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jer 27:12). Zedekiah failed to heed God's advice given by Jeremiah and eventually "the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (v. 16a). The event that occurred next has reverberated throughout Jewish history ever since and included the destruction, looting, and burning of the temple, the destruction of the walls around Jerusalem, and the deportation of the people (including Jeremiah). God wasn't finished with Israel though, and He kept His promise to restore the temple and the city after seventy years. God said through Jeremiah, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). In the closing verses of the reading we see how the Medo-Persian king Cyrus made a decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem along with the restoration of the people (vv. 22 – 23). Interestingly, the Prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Cyrus over a hundred years before he was even born and stated that he would be God's shepherd to rebuild the temple, which hadn't even been destroyed yet. Isaiah said, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'" (Isa 44:28).

What can we learn about God from the reading? First, God works through any world leader, even idolatrous, pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus of Persia. We saw in the reading how God used Nebuchadnezzar to discipline His people during a seventy-year period under He raised up Cyrus to restore it. God called Cyrus His shepherd (Isa 44:28). Saint Paul told in the New Testament about how all rulers were established by God. He said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1).

A second thing we can learn about God from the reading is that He keeps his promises. Even when His patience is tested, His punishment also includes a plan for restoration even before the day of Judgment comes. As we saw in the introduction to the reading, King Zedekiah was the last in a long line of evil rulers that God allowed to serve in the Kingdom of Judah. Once the rules and the people continued in their unrepentant sin, God carried out His promised plan to discipline the people for 70 years. Then, he restored them according to His promise. In the same way, God is also faithful to us

in that He only disciplines us because He loves us. The author of Hebrews said in quoting from Psalm 94:12, "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" Hebrews 12:6). He goes on to explain the meaning of the Lord's discipline. "For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Finally, we can draw more attributes of God from the reading, here are a few:

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).

- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out!

- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move on to the second reading, we will learn more about another important aspect of God: He is a forgiving God, the One who has provided the ultimate forgiveness for the sins of all humankind through the giving of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, take careful note of how clearly God has provided us with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and how works flow from a believer's heart that has been changed by God.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 2:4-10 NAS95 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

Saint Paul provided what is quite likely the clearest explanation of Christian salvation in the entire Bible. He said that a believer was "dead in their transgressions" (Romans 3:23) but then was "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). He states twice that a believer is saved by grace, not works (verses 5 and 8), not because of our works but because of God's great love for us (v. 4) and the grace of God (v. 8a) through our faith (v. 8). Finally, Paul says that the end result of our creation ("His workmanship") is the good works that God has prepared for us through His foreknowledge (v. 10). Salvation is a free gift from God (v. 8) that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3 and includes verse 16, which is the famous one that is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin (that is the Jewish ruling council). Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews, so he met secretly with Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 3:14-21 NAS95 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the*

> *world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."*

The story from verse 14 was recorded in Numbers 21, during which Moses instructed the Hebrew people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sins and given eternal life as a gift of God. This is the same thing that we saw in the second reading (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases, the people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

We see in this passage that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connotation of being unique. So, to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. However, if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save.

We have covered a very lot of important ground this week. As we prepare for Easter Sunday on which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, let's contemplate how great is the mystery of salvation. How are you feeling, do you feel guilty because you sense that you haven't done enough for God? If you have repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness, you can rest in God's graceful provision for you. Spend some time in prayer right now to talk to God and tell Him about your feelings. We pray that you have benefited from the readings this week.

Reflection Questions

1. We saw in the second reading how Paul explained the source and outcome of salvation for a believer in Jesus Christ. Explain the relationship between faith and works for the believer based upon Ephesians 2:4-10.

2. A common theme that exists in the lives of many who do not believe in Jesus as their only source of forgiveness of sin before God is the extent to which they do good works in their lives to justify the bad things they may have done. Read both the second and the Gospel readings again, and then the following verses:

Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Ac 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1John 5:12 – 13 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 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.

In light of these readings, explain the relationship between works and salvation for the non-believing person. Without faith in Jesus, do their "good" works ever provide a means for them to earn their way into heaven?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-14-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the readings and discover many important truths about God. We learn about the nature of God and how He is faithful, just and forgiving. We see how we cannot earn our righteous standing before God and how this is a free gift to us through faith in His One and Only provision, Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Chronicles. The context was a time of deep darkness in the Kingdom of Israel. Godly King Josiah, who was a key reformer for the Nation during the decline of the theocratic kingdom, had just been killed after going into battle against Neco King of Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:23). Following his death, the decline of the kingdom continued with the appointment of Josiah's son Joahaz as King of Judah who was promptly deposed by Neco (2 Chronicles 36:3). At this point, "The king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But Neco took Joahaz his brother and brought him to Egypt" (2 Chronicles 36:4). This king "did evil in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 35:5) and after some 11 years was dragged captive to Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:5a, 6). In the short span of time before the happenings in today's reading two more kings ruled in Judah, first King Jehoiachin (v. 9) and finally Zedekiah who is introduced in the opening verse of the reading.

Note: We included all the intervening verses between 11 and 23 in order to include the full context and lead to the full meaning.

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First Reading:

2 Chronicles 36:11-23 NAS95 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia–in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah–the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 23 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"

We see in the reading that Zedekiah continued the wickedness of his forefathers and did not listen to the Lord who spoke through the contemporary Prophet Jeremiah (vv. 11-12). At that time, the Kingdom of Babylon was now the reigning world power and Jeramiah had spoken to Zedekiah about the coming siege by their mighty ruler King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him a message from the Lord saying, "I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jer 27:12). Zedekiah failed to heed God's advice given by Jeremiah and eventually "the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (v. 16a). The event that occurred next has reverberated throughout Jewish history ever since and included the destruction, looting, and burning of the temple, the destruction of the walls around Jerusalem, and the deportation of the people (including

Jeremiah). God wasn't finished with Israel though, and He kept His promise to restore the temple and the city after seventy years. God said through Jeremiah, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). In the closing verses of the reading we see how the Medo-Persian king Cyrus made a decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem along with the restoration of the people (vv. 22 – 23). Interestingly, the Prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Cyrus over a hundred years before he was even born and stated that he would be God's shepherd to rebuild the temple, which hadn't even been destroyed yet. Isaiah said, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'" (Isa 44:28).

What can we learn about God from the reading? First, God works through any world leader, even idolatrous, pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus of Persia. We saw in the reading how God used Nebuchadnezzar to discipline His people during a seventy-year period under He raised up Cyrus to restore it. God called Cyrus His shepherd (Isa 44:28). Saint Paul told in the New Testament about how all rulers were established by God. He said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1).

A second thing we can learn about God from the reading is that He keeps his promises. Even when His patience is tested, His punishment also includes a plan for restoration even before the day of Judgment comes. As we saw in the introduction to the reading, King Zedekiah was the last in a long line of evil rulers that God allowed to serve in the Kingdom of Judah. Once the rules and the people continued in their unrepentant sin, God carried out His promised plan to discipline the people for 70 years. Then, he restored them according to His promise. In the same way, God is also faithful to us in that He only disciplines us because He loves us. The author of Hebrews said in quoting from Psalm 94:12, "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" Hebrews 12:6). He goes on to explain the meaning of the Lord's discipline. "For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Finally, we can draw more attributes of God from the reading, here are a few:

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger,

nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).

- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out!
- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading, we will learn more about another important aspect of God: He is a forgiving God, One who has provided the ultimate forgiveness for the sins of all humankind through the giving of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, take careful note of how clearly God has provided us with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and how works flow from a believer's heart that has been changed by God.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 2:4-10 NAS95 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Saint Paul provided what is quite likely the clearest explanation of Christian salvation in the entire Bible. He said that a believer was "dead in their transgressions" (Romans 3:23) but then was "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). He states twice that a believer is saved by grace, not works (verses 5 and 8), not because of our works but because of God's great love for us (v. 4) and the grace of God (v. 8a) through our faith (v. 8). Finally, Paul says that the end result of our creation ("His workmanship") is the good works that God has prepared for us through His foreknowledge (v. 10). Salvation is a free gift from God (v. 8) that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23).

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The story including in verse 14 was recorded in Numbers 21 during which Moses instructed the Hebrew people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sin and given eternal life as a gift of God. This is the same thing that we saw in the second reading (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases the people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

We see in this passage that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that

moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connation of being unique. So to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. However, if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save.

We have covered a very lot of important ground this week. As we prepare for Easter Sunday on which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, let's contemplate how great is the mystery of salvation. How are you feeling, do you feel guilty because you sense that you haven't done enough for God? If you have repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness you can rest in God's graceful provision for you. Spend some time in prayer right now to talk to God and tell Him about your feelings. We pray that you have benefited from the readings this week.

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Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

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Ac 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1John 5:12 – 13 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 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.

In light of these readings, explain the relationship between works and salvation for the non-believing person. Without faith in Jesus, do their "good" works ever provide a means for them to earn their way into heaven?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 03-22-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of First Samuel where we will see how God used Samuel to select David as the King of Israel. Then we will move onto Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and finally close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 9 where Jesus miraculously heals a blind man. I also share a story about how God "un-blinded" my eyes to be able to understand the Bible.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Samuel 16 and records the story of how the Prophet Samuel followed God's instructions in order to select the second King of Israel to replace King Saul whom God had rejected. Immediately after Saul was ordained king he began disobeying very clear and direct orders from God provided to him by Samuel. In Chapter 15 Samuel gave Saul clear prophesy from the LORD which said "Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1Samuel 15:3). Saul gathered his troops together and followed God's command *except* for some rather large details. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (v. 9). Oops. Because of this (and the other times Saul disobeyed) God took the kingdom away from him saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands" (v.11a). The text continued, "And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night" (v.11b). So Samuel began to make his search for the new king by following God's order to go to Jesse who was David's father. Let's read the text along with all of the other verses surrounding the reading (verses 1-13) in order to understand the entire context.

First Reading:

> *1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you." 4 So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, "Do you come in peace?" 5 He said, "In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And*

> *he said, 'The LORD has not chosen this one either." 10 Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)*

It's interesting that Samuel was afraid of King Saul since even the elders of the city were afraid of him (v. 4). However, the text recorded not only the story and circumstantial details of the search for the future king but also Samuel's thoughts (v.2). We know of course that God knows all of the secret thoughts of our hearts (Psalm 44:21) and this became even clearer by what we saw in verse 7. "[F]or God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v.7c-ff). God directed the Prophet not to rely upon the outward appearance of the Sons of Jesse; rather he was to wait for God's confirmation. Regardless of his feelings, Samuel followed God's directions exactly and went to David's hometown of Bethlehem.

First, Samuel surveyed the eldest son; the one whom one may think would be the logical choice from among the large clan of Jesse's sons. Eliab passed before him and Samuel didn't receive any confirmation from God. He proceeded on down the line, next with Abinadab, then with Shammah, and down the line with the brothers. Nevertheless, God did not confirm any of them, so Samuel asked Jesse if there were any more brothers. Jesse then sent for his youngest son David (v. 11). The writer of this Scripture then made an interesting observation. After being cautioned not to look on the sons' outward appearance the writer said immediately upon seeing David, "Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance (v. 12b)! Next, the LORD spoke to Samuel. How this was done we are not told. He directed Samuel to anoint David as king (v.12c-ff). So Samuel followed God's command and anointed David as the new King of Israel (v.13a).

The New Testament Bible records that King David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). What does it mean to be a person after God's own heart? First, the reading said, "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (v. 13b). God empowers believers through His Holy Spirit Who indwells everyone that has been born from above (John 3:3). Second, we must submit ourselves to the Lord by being obedient to Him (James 4:7). One of the main stumbling stones that we may have in submission to God is pride. Saint Peter said, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5). Finally, we must develop a love for the Word of God. King David said the following about this in the Book of

Psalms. "I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalms 119:47-48).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, insert your name in place of the "you" in the second word of verse 8, and rephrase it like this. "For Jim, who was formerly in darkness . . . .

Second Reading:

> *8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12 for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you." (Ephesians 5:8-14)*

Paul said that those who were blind are now able to see (v.8). Believers are "children of light" (v.8) as contrasted with children of darkness (or children of the devil) that we will read about in the Gospel lesson. God's children exhibit clear attributes and behaviors that reveal their "light relationship" with their Father God. This is in contrast to the children of darkness who express themselves, many times without even knowing it, as children of the devil. Children of the light express "goodness and righteousness and truth" (v.9), try "to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (v.10), "do not participate in unfruitful deeds of darkness" but instead work to "expose them" (v.11). God, who is the light, exposes everything, for nothing can be hidden from Him (v.13). When we come to a point where we believe and agree with what God says about sin then we have followed God's admonition to awaken from our spiritual darkness so that the light of the Word of God may enable God to launch us on a path of growing in love for and knowledge of Him (4.14).

What if we cannot read the Bible and understand what it means, or if we don't have a desire to even attempt to study it? This week I was contemplating the subject of understanding and coming to the point of loving God's Word. I remember that for the first 35 years of my life, I had an almost impossible time understanding the Bible, this included the New Testament – the Old Testament was a lost cause for me. In fact, when I decided almost 20 years ago to begin reading the Bible I became angry while reading the Old Testament. I thought that since Jesus was eternal that it would be easy for me to locate Him there in the Old Testament. It just didn't make any sense to me, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate. Something had to happen in order to bring about a change or I felt like I

was going to throw it away and just quit. What made the difference for me? It wasn't a magical, one-time event, but the change came as a series of impressions I got while I was praying over the course of about a month long period. I had always prayed to God but at some point while reading in the New Testament, I came to the point where I prayed something like this, again, over a period of several weeks. I told God that I believed that I was a sinner (Romans 3:23) and I deserved punishment for sin (Romans 6:23). I told Him that I believed that Jesus was the only way to heaven (John 14:6) and that I needed His Spirit (John 3:3) to help me to fix the mess that I had made of my life. After a long period of praying to God about this, as well as talking to a few other people about it, I had an eerie encounter with Jesus late one night in my bedroom. In those days, I was living in an upscale condominium in a large city surrounded by the nightlife only a few blocks up Main Street, but I had never felt more alone. I turned off all of the lights and closed the door to my bedroom to pray in silence while laying on my bed. I was frustrated with my inability to live up to my high standards, which included trying to go to church more and party less. After I began praying I felt a tangible presence of Jesus in my dark bedroom that night. In the quiet darkness and with my eyes closed more tightly than I thought possible, I extended my hand to Him over the side of the bed. Although I didn't expect for my hand to be physically grabbed, for I would have freaked out, I sensed the strong presence of Jesus in the room with me during that instant. From that night onwards, I felt a certain presence of God in my heart, something which is hard for me to put into words. However, some days later I noticed that I could read the Bible with understanding and without getting angry, as had happened in the past.

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What about you, do you desire to have a deeper understanding of the Bible? I encourage you to fall on your knees in prayer and ask God to grant both the understanding and the desire. Is there something standing between you and God? The Scripture says that if you confess your sins God is faithful and just to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Scripture also says that we don't have because we don't ask and sometimes when we do ask God doesn't give it to us because we ask with a false motive (James 4:2-3). Everyone, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, must be born from above (John 3:3) in a spiritual sense. If you don't feel that you have the spiritual discernment necessary to read God's Word, just ask Him for it, but ask with the proper motive. This is a motive of desiring to turn from your sin and to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

To summarize, in the first and second reading we discussed how God "unblinded" the minds of people. First, Samuel was "unblinded" to the identity of the future King of Israel, King David.

Second, Paul wrote about how believers are "unblinded" to the reality of sin and even work to expose it. As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will find a story about how Jesus healed a blind man, and this person also received spiritual eyesight through his belief in the Lord Jesus. Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath, something that set him further at odds with the hypocritical Pharisees.

A very interesting insight regarding the topic of blindness can be found by studying the context of the Gospel lesson immediately prior in Chapter 8. Here Jesus had a very difficult conversation with His nemesis the Pharisees, a conflict that continues into the lesson today in Chapter 9. Jesus pronounced the source of their logic after they began to accuse Him and He read their minds and told them that they wanted to kill Him. When the Pharisees said that Abraham was their father (John 8:39) Jesus said, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Next, they accused Jesus of having a demon. This led to Jesus making one of His famous "I Am" statements. "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am'" (v. 58). This powerful statement was an outright testimony by Jesus to his deity (see also John 10:30). Finally, in the very last verse of Chapter 8 John wrote, "Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus **hid Himself** and went out of the temple" (v. 59, emphasis added). Notice that Jesus "hid himself," which is another way of looking at it was that he blinded the Pharisees.

As you read the lesson today, notice that Jesus' first action was to "unblind" a blind man. Think of it like this: First, he blinded the *proud* Pharisees, then he "unblinded" a *humble* blind man.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." 6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. 8 Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." 10 So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is He?" He *said, "I do not know." 13 They *brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a*

*man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they *said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." 18 The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, 19 and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" 28 They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. 31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. 32 "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 "If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. (John 9:1-41)*

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the physical condition of the blind man was as a result of the man or his parent's sin. Jesus corrected this false believe and said that God allowed this condition so that he could be healed during this particular event! God is sovereign over every single event in history, and He designed this whole affair to show the glory of God. Second, the healed, formerly blind man became a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus and this further deepened the His opposition to the Pharisees. One has to like what the formerly blind man said to the Pharisees, it's almost like something we could hear from a smart

talking teenager! "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v.25). After the Pharisees had put him out of the temple (most likely permanently, see his parents warning in v. 22), Jesus came and presented Himself to him, telling the man that he was the Messiah (v. 35, "Son of Man"). The blind man believed, and then worshiped Him (v.38). Third, the Pharisees alluded to the fact that they held the same belief as the disciples about sin being the cause of physical infirmity (v. 24). Someone that was born blind clearly was a sinner, and sinners, according to the Pharisees, should have nothing to do with worship in the temple. They went on to say, "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" (v. 32).

This powerful story concluded with some of the most intense teaching ever found in the New Testament. Read the conclusion again very carefully.

39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

One time I was reading a certain spiritual book called *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles J. Stanford (Zondervan 1984). This book contains many very powerful sections that I copiously underlined and highlighted, probably adding a half a pound to the book just for the weight of it all! I found one particular page to be so moving and important that I just wrote a note at the top of the page and highlighted the note in yellow that said, "Consider this entire page highlighted!" The last three verses of the Gospel lesson are like that – consider the whole section highlighted! Jesus' statement is the essence of the Gospel message. Jesus said that He came into the world to reveal the two groups of people, those on the narrow road to life and those on the broad road to eternal separation from God (Matthew 7:13). In a spiritual sense, there are two types of people, children of God the Father and the rest, by default, children of the devil. The children of the light have spiritual vision, but the children of the darkness are spiritually blind. Saint Paul said:

> *3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).*

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter let's all us pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that can come only through the good news of the Gospel and believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

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Reflection Questions

1. How have you been "unblinded" to the spiritual truths of the Bible? Consider submitting a brief testimony of to the Christians for Christ web site: https://www.christiansforchrist.org/about/personal-testimonies
2. Frequently when someone brings up King David our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality this is similar to what the Pharisees did to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing – though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before.

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

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

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

3. How could you reach out to someone who hasn't experienced the miraculous gift of God's spiritual healing?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 03-31-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of First Samuel where we will see how God used Samuel to select David as the King of Israel. Then we will move onto Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and finally close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 9 where Jesus miraculously heals a blind man. I also share a story about how God "unblinded" my eyes to be able to understand the Bible.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Samuel 16 and records the story of how the Prophet Samuel followed God's instructions in order to select the second King of Israel to replace King Saul whom God had rejected. Immediately after Saul was ordained king, he began disobeying very clear and direct orders from God provided to him by Samuel. In Chapter 15 Samuel gave Saul clear prophesy from the LORD which said, "*Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey*" (1Samuel 15:3). Saul gathered his troops together and followed God's command *except* for some rather large details. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (v. 9). Oops. Because of this (and the other times Saul disobeyed) God took the kingdom away from him saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands" (v.11a). The text continued, "And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night" (v.11b). So, Samuel began to make his search for the new king by following God's order to go to Jesse who was David's father. Let's read the text along with the verses surrounding the reading (verses 1-13) in order to understand the entire context.

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First Reading:

1 Samuel 16:1-13 NAS95 1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons."

Omitted:

2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 "You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you." 4 So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, "Do you come in peace?"

5 He said, "In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Omitted:8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'The LORD has not chosen this one either."

10 Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah.

It's interesting that Samuel was afraid of King Saul since even the elders of the city were afraid of him (v. 4). However, the text recorded not only the story and circumstantial details of the search for the future king but also Samuel's thoughts (v.2). We know of course that God knows all of the secret thoughts of our hearts (Psalm 44:21) and this became even clearer by what we saw in verse 7. "[F]or God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v.7c-ff). God directed the Prophet not to rely upon the outward appearance of the Sons of

Jesse; rather he was to wait for God's confirmation. Regardless of his feelings, Samuel followed God's directions exactly and went to David's hometown of Bethlehem.

First, Samuel surveyed the eldest son; the one whom one may think would be the logical choice from among the large clan of Jesse's sons. Eliab passed before him and Samuel didn't receive any confirmation from God. He proceeded on down the line, next with Abinadab, then with Shammah, and down the line with the brothers. Nevertheless, God did not confirm any of them, so Samuel asked Jesse if there were any more brothers. Jesse then sent for his youngest son David (v. 11). The writer of this Scripture then made an interesting observation. After being cautioned not to look on the sons' outward appearance the writer said immediately upon seeing David, "Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance (v. 12b)! Next, the LORD spoke to Samuel. How this was done we are not told. He directed Samuel to anoint David as king (v.12c-ff). So, Samuel followed God's command and anointed David as the new King of Israel (v.13a).

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, insert your name in place of the "you" in the second word of verse 8, and rephrase it like this. "For Jim, who was formerly in darkness . . . .

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 5:8-14 NAS95 8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12 for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you."*

Paul said that those who were blind are now able to see (v.8). Believers are "children of light" (v.8) as contrasted with children of darkness (or children of the devil) that we will read about in the Gospel lesson. God's children exhibit clear attributes and behaviors that reveal their "light relationship" with their Father God. This contrast with the children of darkness who express themselves, many times without even knowing it, as children of the devil. Children of the light:

- express "goodness and righteousness and truth" (v.9),
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God, who is the light, exposes everything, for nothing can be hidden from Him (v.13). When we come to a point where we believe and agree with what God says about sin then we have followed God's admonition to awaken from our spiritual darkness so that the light of the Word of God may enable God to launch us on a path of growing in love for and knowledge of Him (4.14).

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As you read the lesson today, notice that Jesus' first action was to "unblind" a blind man. Think of it like this: First, he blinded the *proud* Pharisees, then he "unblinded" a *humble* blind man.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 9:1-41 NAS95 1 As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." 6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. 8 Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." 10 So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is He?" He *said, "I do not know." 13 They *brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they *said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." 18 The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, 19 and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I*

> *was blind, now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" 28 They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. 31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. 32 "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 "If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the physical condition of the blind man was as a result of the man or his parent's sin. Jesus corrected this false believe and said that God allowed this condition so that he could be healed during this particular event! God is sovereign over every single event in history, and He designed this whole affair to show the glory of God. Second, the healed, formerly blind man became a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus and this further deepened the His opposition to the Pharisees. One has to like what the formerly blind man said to the Pharisees, it's almost like something we could hear from a smart talking teenager! "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v.25). After the Pharisees had put him out of the temple (most likely permanently, see his parents warning in v. 22), Jesus came and presented Himself to him, telling the man that he was the Messiah (v. 35, "Son of Man"). The blind man believed, and then worshiped Him (v.38). Third, the Pharisees alluded to the fact that they held the same belief as the disciples about sin being the cause of physical infirmity (v. 24). Someone that was born blind clearly was a sinner, and sinners, according to the Pharisees, should have nothing to do with worship in the temple. They went on to say, "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" (v. 32).

This powerful story concluded with some of the most intense teaching ever found in the New Testament. Read the conclusion again very carefully.

> *39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

One time I was reading a certain spiritual book called *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles J. Stanford (Zondervan 1984). This book contains many very powerful sections that I copiously underlined and highlighted, probably adding a half a pound to the book just for the weight of it all! I found one particular page to be so moving and important that I just wrote a note at the top of the page and highlighted the note in yellow that said, "Consider this entire page highlighted!" The last three verses of the Gospel lesson are like that – consider the whole section highlighted! Jesus' statement is the essence of the Gospel message. Jesus said that He came into the world to reveal the two groups of people, those on the narrow road to life and those on the broad road to eternal separation from God (Matthew 7:13). In a spiritual sense, there are two types of people, children of God the Father and the rest, by default, children of the devil. The children of the light have spiritual vision, but the children of the darkness are spiritually blind. Saint Paul said:

> *3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).*

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter let's all us pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that can come only through the good news of the Gospel and believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you been "unblinded" to the spiritual truths of the Bible? Consider submitting a brief testimony of to the Christians for Christ web site: https://www.christiansforchrist.org/list-of-articles/submit-your-testimony
2. Frequently when someone brings up King David our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality this is similar to what the Pharisees did to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing – though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before. In what ways can you relate to how the Pharisees treated Jesus?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 03-11-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the readings and discover many important truths about God. We learn about the nature of God and how He is faithful, just and forgiving. We see how we cannot earn our righteous standing before God and how this is a free gift to us through faith in His One and Only provision, Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Chronicles. The context was a time of deep darkness in the Kingdom of Israel. Godly King Josiah, who was a key reformer for the Nation during the decline of the theocratic kingdom, had just been killed after going into battle against Neco King of Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:23). Following his death the decline of the kingdom continued with the appointment of Josiah's son Joahaz as King of Judah who was promptly deposed by Neco (2 Chronicles 36:3). At this point, "The king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But Neco took Joahaz his brother and brought him to Egypt" (2 Chronicles 36:4). This king "did evil in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 35:5) and after some 11 years was dragged captive to Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:5a, 6). In the short span of time before the happenings in today's reading two more kings ruled in Judah, first King Jehoiachin (v. 9) and finally Zedekiah who is introduced in the opening verse of the reading.

Note: We included all the intervening verses between 11 and 23 in order to include the full context and lead to the full meaning.

First Reading:

> *2 Chronicles 36:11-23 NAS95 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia–in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah–the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 23 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"*

We see in the reading that Zedekiah continued the wickedness of his forefathers, and did not listen to the Lord who spoke through the contemporary Prophet Jeremiah (vv. 11-12). At that time, the Kingdom of Babylon was now the reigning world power and Jeramiah had spoken to Zedekiah about the coming siege by their mighty ruler King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him a message from the Lord saying, "I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jer 27:12). Zedekiah failed to heed God's advice given by Jeremiah and eventually "the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (v. 16a). The event that occurred next has reverberated throughout Jewish history ever since and included the destruction, looting, and burning of the temple, the destruction of the walls around Jerusalem, and the deportation of the people (including

Jeremiah). God wasn't finished with Israel though, and He kept His promise to restore the temple and the city after seventy years. God said through Jeremiah, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). In the closing verses of the reading we see how the Medo-Persian king Cyrus made a decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem along with the restoration of the people (vv. 22 – 23). Interestingly, the Prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Cyrus over a hundred years before he was even born, and stated that he would be God's shepherd to rebuild the temple, which hadn't even been destroyed yet. Isaiah said, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isa 44:28).

What can we learn about God from the reading? First, God works through any world leader, even idolatrous, pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus of Persia. We saw in the reading how God used Nebuchadnezzar to discipline His people during a seventy-year period under He raised up Cyrus to restore it. God called Cyrus His shepherd (Isa 44:28). Saint Paul told in the New Testament about how all rulers were established by God. He said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1).

A second thing we can learn about God from the reading is that He keeps his promises. Even when His patience is tested, His punishment also includes a plan for restoration even before the day of Judgment comes. As we saw in the introduction to the reading, King Zedekiah was the last in a long line of evil rulers that God allowed to serve in the Kingdom of Judah. Once the rules and the people continued in their unrepentant sin, God carried out His promised plan to discipline the people for 70 years. Then, he restored them according to His promise. In the same way, God is also faithful to us in that He only disciplines us because He loves us. The author of Hebrews said in quoting from Psalm 94:12, "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" Hebrews 12:6). He goes on to explain the meaning of the Lord's discipline. "For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Finally, we can draw more attributes of God from the reading, here are a few:

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).
- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out!
- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading, we will learn more about another important aspect of God: He is a forgiving God, One who has provided the ultimate forgiveness for the sins of all humankind through the giving of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, take careful note of how clearly God has provided us with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and how works flow from a believer's heart that has been changed by God.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 2:4-10 NAS95 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

Saint Paul provided what is quite likely the clearest explanation of Christian salvation in the entire Bible. He said that a believer was "dead in their transgressions" (Romans 3:23) but then was "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). He states twice that a believer is saved by grace, not works (verses 5 and 8), not because of our works but because of God's great love for us (v. 4) and the grace of God (v. 8a) through our faith (v. 8). Finally, Paul says that the end result of our creation ("His workmanship") is the good works that God has prepared for us through His foreknowledge (v. 10). Salvation is a free gift from God (v. 8) that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3 and includes verse 16, which is the famous one that is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin (that is the Jewish ruling council). Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews so he met secretly with Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 3:14-21 NAS95 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not*

> *perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."*

The story including in verse 14 was recorded in Numbers 21 during which Moses instructed the Hebrew people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sin and given eternal life as a gift of God. This is the same thing that we saw in the second reading (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases the people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

We see in this passage that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connation of being unique. So to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. However, if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save.

We have covered a very lot of important ground this week. As we prepare for Easter Sunday on which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, let's contemplate how great is the mystery of salvation. How are you feeling, do you feel guilty because you sense that you haven't done enough for God? If you have repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness you can rest in God's graceful provision for you. Spend some time in prayer right now to talk to God and tell Him about your feelings. We pray that you have benefited from the readings this week.

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Reflection Questions

1. We saw in the second reading how Paul explained the source and outcome of salvation for a believer in Jesus Christ. Explain the relationship between faith and works for the believer based upon Ephesians 2:4-10.

2. A common theme that exists in the lives of many who do not believe in Jesus as their only source of forgiveness of sin before God is the extent to which they do good works in their lives to justify the bad things they may have done. Read both the second and the Gospel reading again, and then the following verses:

Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Ac 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1John 5:12 – 13 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 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.

In light of these readings, explain the relationship between works and salvation for the non-believing person. Without faith in Jesus, do their "good" works ever provide a means for them to earn their way into heaven?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-26-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of First Samuel where we will see how God used Samuel to select David as the King of Israel. Then we will move onto Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and finally close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 9 where Jesus miraculously heals a blind man. I also share a story about how God "unblinded" my eyes to be able to understand the Bible.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Samuel 16 and records the story of how the Prophet Samuel followed God's instructions in order to select the second King of Israel to replace King Saul whom God had rejected. Immediately after Saul was ordained king he began disobeying very clear and direct orders from God provided to him by Samuel. In Chapter 15 Samuel gave Saul clear prophesy from the LORD which said "Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1Samuel 15:3). Saul gathered his troops together and followed God's command *except* for some rather large details. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (v. 9). Oops. Because of this (and the other times Saul disobeyed) God took the kingdom away from him saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands" (v.11a). The text continued, "And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night" (v.11b). So Samuel began to make his search for the new king by following God's order to go to Jesse who was David's father. Let's read the text along with all of the other verses surrounding the reading (verses 1-13) in order to understand the entire context.

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First Reading:

1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you." 4 So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, "Do you come in peace?" 5 He said, "In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'The LORD has not chosen this one either." 10 Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)

It's interesting that Samuel was afraid of King Saul since even the elders of the city were afraid of him (v. 4). However, the text recorded not only the story and circumstantial details of the search for the future king but also Samuel's thoughts (v.2). We know of course that God knows all of the secret thoughts of our hearts (Psalm 44:21) and this became even clearer by what we saw in verse 7. "[F]or God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v.7c-ff). God directed the Prophet not to rely upon the outward appearance of the Sons of Jesse; rather he was to wait for God's confirmation. Regardless of his feelings, Samuel followed God's directions exactly and went to David's hometown of Bethlehem.

First, Samuel surveyed the eldest son; the one whom one may think would be the logical choice from among the large clan of Jesse's sons. Eliab passed before him and Samuel didn't receive any confirmation from God. He proceeded on down the line, next with Abinadab, then with Shammah, and down the line with the brothers. Nevertheless, God did not confirm any of them, so Samuel asked Jesse if there were any more brothers. Jesse then sent for his youngest son David (v. 11). The writer of this Scripture then made an interesting observation. After being cautioned not to look on the sons' outward appearance the writer said immediately upon seeing David, "Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance (v. 12b)! Next, the LORD spoke to Samuel. How

this was done we are not told. He directed Samuel to annoint David as king (v.12c-ff). So Samuel followed God's command and anointed David as the new King of Israel (v.13a).

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, insert your name in place of the "you" in the second word of verse 8, and rephrase it like this. "For Jim, who was formerly in darkness . . . .

Second Reading:

8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12 for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you." (Ephesians 5:8-14)

Paul said that those who were blind are now able to see (v.8). Believers are "children of light" (v.8) as contrasted with children of darkness (or children of the devil) that we will read about in the Gospel lesson. God's children exhibit clear attributes and behaviors that reveal their "light relationship" with their Father God. This is in contrast to the children of darkness who express themselves, many times without even knowing it, as children of the devil. Children of the light express "goodness and righteousness and truth" (v.9), try "to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (v.10), "do not participate in unfruitful deeds of darkness" but instead work to "expose them" (v.11). God, who is the light, exposes everything, for nothing can be hidden from Him (v.13). When we come to a point where we believe and agree with what God says about sin then we have followed God's admonition to awaken from our spiritual darkness so that the light of the Word of God may enable God to launch us on a path of growing in love for and knowledge of Him (4.14).

What if we cannot read the Bible and understand what it means, or if we don't have a desire to even

attempt to study it? This week I was contemplating the subject of understanding and coming to the point of loving God's Word. I remember that for the first 35 years of my life, I had an almost impossible time understanding the Bible, this included the New Testament – the Old Testament was a lost cause for me. In fact, when I decided almost 20 years ago to begin reading the Bible I became angry while reading the Old Testament. I thought that since Jesus was eternal that it would be easy for me to locate Him there in the Old Testament. It just didn't make any sense to me, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate. Something had to happen in order to bring about a change or I felt like I was going to throw it away and just quit. What made the difference for me? It wasn't a magical, one-time event, but the change came as a series of impressions I got while I was praying over the course of about a month long period. I had always prayed to God but at some point while reading in the New Testament, I came to the point where I prayed something like this, again, over a period of several weeks. I told God that I believed that I was a sinner (Romans 3:23) and I deserved punishment for sin (Romans 6:23). I told Him that I believed that Jesus was the only way to heaven (John 14:6) and that I needed His Spirit (John 3:3) to help me to fix the mess that I had made of my life. After a long period of praying to God about this, as well as talking to a few other people about it, I had an eerie encounter with Jesus late one night in my bedroom. In those days, I was living in an upscale condominium in a large city surrounded by the nightlife only a few blocks up Main Street, but I had never felt more alone. I turned off all of the lights and closed the door to my bedroom to pray in silence while laying on my bed. I was frustrated with my inability to live up to my high standards, which included trying to go to church more and party less. After I began praying I felt a tangible presence of Jesus in my dark bedroom that night. In the quiet darkness and with my eyes closed more tightly than I thought possible, I extended my hand to Him over the side of the bed. Although I didn't expect for my hand to be physically grabbed, for I would have freaked out, I sensed the strong presence of Jesus in the room with me during that instant. From that night onwards, I felt a certain presence of God in my heart, something which is hard for me to put into words. However, some days later I noticed that I could read the Bible with understanding and without getting angry, as had happened in the past.

I still have difficulty in reading a variety of books but have come to the point that I find joy in reading the Bible. Last week I downloaded the free version of Saint Augustine's Confession onto my Kindle, thinking that by reading this I would gain some important spiritual insights and become a more godly man. I'm ashamed to say that I couldn't make it through one entire page. The Elizabethan English didn't help, but I'm just not a philosopher. Sometimes we need to understand and accept our limits.

What about you, do you desire to have a deeper understanding of the Bible? I encourage you to fall on your knees in prayer and ask God to grant both the understanding and the desire. Is there something standing between you and God? The Scripture says that if you confess your sins God is faithful and just to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Scripture also says that we don't have because we don't ask and sometimes when we do ask God doesn't give it to us because we ask with a false motive (James 4:2-3). Everyone, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, must be born from above (John 3:3) in a spiritual sense. If you don't feel that you have the spiritual discernment necessary to read God's Word, just ask Him for it, but ask with the

proper motive. This is a motive of desiring to turn from your sin and to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

To summarize, in the first and second reading we discussed how God "unblinded" the minds of people. First, Samuel was "unblinded" to the identity of the future King of Israel, King David. Second, Paul wrote about how believers are "unblinded" to the reality of sin and even work to expose it. As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will find a story about how Jesus healed a blind man, and this person also received spiritual eyesight through his belief in the Lord Jesus. Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath, something that set him further at odds with the hypocritical Pharisees.

A very interesting insight regarding the topic of blindness can be found by studying the context of the Gospel lesson immediately prior in Chapter 8. Here Jesus had a very difficult conversation with His nemesis the Pharisees, a conflict that continues into the lesson today in Chapter 9. Jesus pronounced the source of their logic after they began to accuse Him and He read their minds and told them that they wanted to kill Him. When the Pharisees said that Abraham was their father (John 8:39) Jesus said, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Next, they accused Jesus of having a demon. This led to Jesus making one of His famous "I Am" statements. "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am'" (v. 58). This powerful statement was an outright testimony by Jesus to his deity (see also John 10:30). Finally, in the very last verse of Chapter 8 John wrote, "Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus **hid Himself** and went out of the temple" (v. 59, emphasis added). Notice that Jesus "hid himself," which is another way of looking at it was that he blinded the Pharisees.

As you read the lesson today, notice that Jesus' first action was to "unblind" a blind man. Think of it like this: First, he blinded the *proud* Pharisees, then he "unblinded" a *humble* blind man.

Gospel Reading:

1 As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." 6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. 8 Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." 10 So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and

*anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is He?" He *said, "I do not know." 13 They *brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they *said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." 18 The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, 19 and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" 28 They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. 31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. 32 "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 "If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. (John 9:1-41)*

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the physical condition of the blind man was as a result of the man or his parent's sin. Jesus corrected this false believe and said that God allowed this condition so that he could be healed during this particular event! God is sovereign over every single event in history, and He designed this whole affair to show the glory of God. Second, the healed, formerly blind man became a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus and this further deepened the His opposition to the Pharisees. One has to like what the

formerly blind man said to the Pharisees, it's almost like something we could hear from a smart talking teenager! "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v.25). After the Pharisees had put him out of the temple (most likely permanently, see his parents warning in v. 22), Jesus came and presented Himself to him, telling the man that he was the Messiah (v. 35, "Son of Man"). The blind man believed, and then worshiped Him (v.38). Third, the Pharisees alluded to the fact that they held the same belief as the disciples about sin being the cause of physical infirmity (v. 24). Someone that was born blind clearly was a sinner, and sinners, according to the Pharisees, should have nothing to do with worship in the temple. They went on to say, "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" (v. 32).

This powerful story concluded with some of the most intense teaching ever found in the New Testament. Read the conclusion again very carefully.

39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

One time I was reading a certain spiritual book called *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles J. Stanford (Zondervan 1984). This book contains many very powerful sections that I copiously underlined and highlighted, probably adding a half a pound to the book just for the weight of it all! I found one particular page to be so moving and important that I just wrote a note at the top of the page and highlighted the note in yellow that said, "Consider this entire page highlighted!" The last three verses of the Gospel lesson are like that – consider the whole section highlighted! Jesus' statement is the essence of the Gospel message. Jesus said that He came into the world to reveal the two groups of people, those on the narrow road to life and those on the broad road to eternal separation from God (Matthew 7:13). In a spiritual sense, there are two types of people, children of God the Father and the rest, by default, children of the devil. The children of the light have spiritual vision, but the children of the darkness are spiritually blind. Saint Paul said:

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter let's all us pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that can come only through the good news of the Gospel and believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

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Reflection Questions

1. How have you been "unblinded" to the spiritual truths of the Bible? Consider submitting a brief testimony of to the Christians for Christ web site:
http://www.christiansforchrist.org/personal-testimonies

2. Frequently when someone brings up King David our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality this is similar to what the Pharisees did to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing – though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before.

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

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

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

3. How could you reach out to someone who hasn't experienced the miraculous gift of God's spiritual healing?

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