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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-29-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a study of a reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses pours out his heart to the Israelites just before they were to begin their final conquest and enter the Promised Land. Moses cautions the people not to add to or take from the Law but to just simply follow it. Second, we look at a reading from the Book of James, said to be "the Proverbs" of the New Testament. Then we close with the Gospel reading from Saint Mark in which Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees for doing exactly what Moses told the people not to do by creating religious traditions, which they held above the Mosaic Law. In application, we will address the tendency toward formulaic religion and how God uses hardship to accomplish His purposes.

Do you believe that if you obey the government, pretty much keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week that God will reward you with a life filled with some level of prosperity and good health? What if you sensed and were obedient to a call from God to uproot your life in order to engage in missions? Would you then be upset if things didn't turn out perfectly for you in your new life? I know a man named Dave that studied hard to become a missionary and moved to France with his wife to reach people for Jesus in this spiritually dark but civilized nation. He worked there for many years, had a good degree of success in his ministry and followed biblical teaching in all that he did. However, after being in France several decades, his health began to decline. As the months went by, his condition continued to worsen and at some point, he was told that he would need a liver transplant or he would die. You may ask, how could God allow this life-threatening condition in his life which threatened to end his ministry? How could God allow this situation in his life when he had sacrificed so much to move there, was faithful in his following the Bible, and was obedient in every way to the laws of his adopted nation? Later in this lesson you will hear what happened to Dave.

According to Scripture God allows challenges in the lives of believers which goes against what is known in our times as "health and wealth" or the prosperity gospel. This week we are going to see in the Gospel reading how Jesus confronted the false teachings occurring during His ministry from a Jewish religious group called the Pharisees. These were a sect that taught, in effect, salvation by works and held some of the same false beliefs as the modern prosperity gospel preachers of today.

It would be easy to misread the first reading if we have this formulaic or prosperity gospel in mind. The formula goes like this: I am obedient to God's commands, then He has to give me the circumstances in life that I think I deserve. The problem behind this formula is that is lacks the relational underpinning that God desires for us. We obey Him out of our own effort and then feel justified in our sense of entitlement. We will need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of relationship with God now made possible through grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word that means literally "second law." The Book begins with a chronicle of the events of the Hebrew people in the period just after the wilderness wanderings. Because of the people's disobedience they were forbidden from entering the Promised Land and spent thirty-eight years wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. During this time God revealed the Law to Moses and began the Levitical Priesthood with his brother Aaron as the first high priest. At the end of these thirty-eight years God prompted Moses to lead military campaigns against the two regional leaders on the "other side" (meaning the east) of the Jordan River. The Hebrew army soundly defeated both King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. According to this Scripture, the Hebrews "captured all [their] cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women and children. We left no survivors. Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves with the plunder of the cities we captured" (Deuteronomy 2:34-35). These events occurred over the final two years, which closed out the full forty years of wandering in the desert outside of God's Promised Land (to the west of the Jordan).

Even more so than in previous readings in order to glean the proper meaning from the passages that follow, it is necessary to clearly understand the context. Reflect upon each of the following points that will help to lead you to the proper contextual understanding for today's lesson.

- God does not change (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17), but He does change the terms through which He deals with His people according to His covenants. There are five covenants in the Old

Testament Bible.

I. First was the Noahic (pronounced "no ay ick") Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7).

II. The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis Chapter 12. In this God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v.1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v.3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future.

III. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), and the context of the first reading today. The promises of this Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The Law was clear and exact, unlike the religious traditions that were derived from it over the centuries (as we will read about in the Gospel lesson). Moses spent forty years teaching the people the Law, and they spent forty years breaking it! Point of Fact: Had I lived during that time I wouldn't have done any better than they did.

IV. The forth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant was and will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah.

IV. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b), and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v.34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17). This Covenant is the terms through which God deals with us as believers today.

- God's plan of salvation for people has never changed, whether in the Old or New Testaments, although God has revealed His plan more clearly through the revelation of Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:26 and Hebrews 1:1). Everyone is saved by faith in God's Savior whether it was Jews in the Old Testament, Jews in the New Testament, or Gentiles during either of the Testaments. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God is clear that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is rejection of His only provision for the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, this is the key point that we need to remember as we study the first reading showing the sinful behavior of the Jews and how Jesus confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees in the

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Gospel lesson:

- God assesses different short-term penalties for sin according to each era and covenant. For example, before the Noahic Covenant when Cain killed Abel, God dealt immediately with this sin by putting a mark on Cain, exiling him to a foreign land, and causing him to tirelessly till unfruitful soil (Genesis 4:12-15). As a second example, in the first reading today we will see Moses' mention of an instance in which God acted quickly and harshly to judge sin among the Jewish exiles. Later during the time of the Exodus which is the context of the first reading, God ruled His people as a "theocratic kingdom." During this time Moses, his successor Joshua (and later the prophets and King David) received direct guidance from God. During the "theocratic kingdom" God levied heavy consequences upon those who broke the Law. In John's Gospel Jesus used the metaphor of God's pruning in the life of a believer in order to bring about more fruit (John 15:2). God's pruning in the context of the theocratic kingdom may have meant sudden death for the disobedient Jew, whether it came from God or as a result of capital punishment levied by the Israelite priests (and later Kings).

In our era God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (john 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast in the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times God revealed His grace for the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. Lest we think that God doesn't immediately judge sin in some cases, we must remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), as well as Saint Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Now, with this context in mind let's move to today's reading which is an address by Moses to the people as he prepares to appoint Joshua his successor (3:28) who would soon lead the people into the new land. Although Moses himself was forbidden by God to enter (Deuteronomy 3:23-26), God did allow him to travel to the top of Mount Pisgah to see a divine vision of the land just before his death (3:27).

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 4:1-8 NAS95 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am

teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. 4 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. 5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"

Moses urged the people to follow the Levitical Law without adding to it or taking from it (v. 2) so that they may "live and go in and take possession of the land" being given by God to them (v. 1). We will see later in the Gospel reading that the people didn't heed God's warning not to add to the law. Interestingly, God repeated this admonition in the very last Book of the New Testament not to add to or take from the Scriptures (Revelation 22:18). God's marching orders were for the people to just do what He has clearly told them through the Law delivered to Moses. Twice in this reading Moses tells the people to keep the commandments of the Law (v. 1, v. 2). Keeping the Law in the context of the reading does bring with it the promise of material blessing because God had promised the people entrance to the Promised Land. The recipients of the blessing were the minority of those in the Exodus, those who were still alive and the ones whom had "held fast to the LORD" (v. 4). If God killed a person because of their sin, then obviously, they didn't receive the blessings of the Promised Land. As we noted in the introduction, the consequences of disobedience during the theocratic kingdom could be severe and immediate. Beginning in verse 3 Moses recounted what God did to the disobedient people as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become immersed in the worship of the god "Baal of Peor" (Numbers 25:5). In that Numbers it says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (Numbers 25:4). A plague followed in which 24,000 people died (Numbers 25:9). This was God's way of purging the evil in order to protect the integrity of those who were seeking to follow God with a pure heart.

Another point from the reading was that God had established the Nation of Israel as a light to everyone in the world. God's "chosen people" were not chosen just for their own sake, but for the salvation of all people groups through their testimony of God's greatness (see also John 4:22). Moses addressed the people just before they were to begin the final conquest(s) to claim the land, saying "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the **sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes** and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding

people'" (v. 6, emphasis added). The Jews whose hearts were pointed towards the worship of the true God expressed their beliefs through the observance of the Law. The Jews' unique lifestyle served as God's showplace to the Gentile nations surrounding them. Their unique civil, moral, and ceremonial Laws were designed by God as a herald to the idolatrous people of the world. This was especially true when the Jews were dispersed around the world during the various captivities that God allowed throughout history, a pattern which continues to this very day. As Christians we are called by God in a way similar to be like the Jew, living in a peculiar way, heralding the good news of God's grace and shining biblical light to our sin darkened world (Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8). This ministry isn't just reserved for vocational works like my missionary friend Dave in France.

As we transition to the second reading we will see some practical ways in which we are believers in Jesus Christ can live our lives as a beacon shining on the pathway for people to find God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of James, a letter often called the "Proverbs of the New Testament." James is a Book filled with practical wisdom and the application of godly principles drawn from throughout Scripture. The message woven into the entire book of James is the principle stated by Jesus, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In a letter such as written by James, the literary context (knowing the verses before and after the reading, and the flow of the author's thought) is very important for understanding the original author's intent. In the reading today, the verse immediately prior to the reading was omitted (verse 16). Once that is included there is a nice connection created between the first reading and the Gospel lesson we will look at later.

Second Reading:

James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James 1:17-27 NAS95 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. 19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to

speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James cautioned the people to "not be deceived" (v. 16), but about what? His caution was to not be deceived about the source of good things. The enemy subtly tries to convince us that God's gifts are not good or that good can come from any other source besides God. The source of every authentic blessing is God (v. 17). He encourages them by pointing out that they are the first fruits of the future believers (v. 18). This is much like the Jews we saw in the first reading who were uniquely commissioned by God as a light to the nations.

You'll notice that James called the people "my beloved brethren" twice in the first four verses to give a loving context for his more confrontational statements in this passage. He gets to the heart of the matter by hitting his readers square between the eyes with teaching on the danger of the tongue (v. 19, v. 26, also repeated in chapter 3), and the falseness of believers who profess one thing, but live another way. In God's economy, there is no such thing as not "living up" to our beliefs. Instead, our lifestyle and choices are merely reflecting our true beliefs. Basic religion, James says, is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 27). While not everyone has a direct ministry to orphans and widows, James is highlighting the need for us to express our religion in practical acts of service to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The orphans and widows of his day would have been those who are marginalized by society, vulnerable to exploitation and overlooked because of their inability to reward those who serve them. Serving those who cannot give you any "kick back" helps to ensure that our motives are pure.

In the closing verse James said to "keep oneself unstained by the world." This is an important admonition that, if heeded daily, could help all of us live a more abundant life in the Lord. This is akin to "being in the world, but not of it" (Matthew 17:14-16), which allows us to be a witness to those who do not know the Lord as we live with a different mindset. The Book of James provides many such godly proverbs which can help us to live fully surrendered lives for Jesus. In the first reading we saw where Moses called the people to obey the Law of God. James calls people to obey

not only the teachings of Jesus but also the spirit of the New Covenant. He also provides additional instruction in practical ways to implement this new relationship with God. We don't have to be motivated by guilt or shame as we consider serving God. When we truly listen to the Holy Spirit, Who is the life giving force empowering us to perform things including (and exceeding) "basic religion," He teaches us how to follow through with our particular race to run (Hebrews 12:1). In this way we look to fulfill not just the letter of the law, but we truly start to see how to be God's hands and feet in the world, thus fulfilling the spirit of His ways. This contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law connects us to the Gospel lesson, where we will see Jesus' teaching against the falsehoods taught by the Pharisees who embraced the letter of the Law but disregarded the spirit of the Law altogether.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is, pardon the pun, sandwiched between Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-34) and His feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10). Just prior to the events in the reading today Jesus had walked on the water (Mark 6:48) and healed many sick people in the lakeside community of Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-56).

Gospel Reading:

Mark 7:1-23 NAS95 1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his

mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." 14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. 16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) 20 And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

The scribes and Pharisees formed their own flavor of "Deuteronomy," or second law, not heeding Moses' call we read about in the first reading. As James warned, they were deceived about even doing the works of the Law regarding basic religion including the honoring of the parents, a clear commandment of God (Exodus 20:12). The behaviors associated with basic religion were the things that the Pharisees were consciously choosing not to do! Because the scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, it was vitally important for Jesus to point out the hypocrisy of their ways and to warn people against their bad influence.

There were a few things in this passage that the religious leaders did that were opposing true heart religion. The first was their insistence on having pure hands, but neglecting to have a pure heart. The second was that they had contrived a religious practice that provided a means to neglect financial assistance to their parents by saying those resources were instead given to God ("Corban," v. 11). The scribes' and Pharisees' "traditions" did in fact trump the first Law of God, that given by Moses and taught throughout the first five Books of the Bible. Jesus explained that what defiles a person is not what goes into their body, but it is what comes out of their heart. The uncleanness is already apart of us, it just takes the right variables to have it come out and show itself. The sin-sickness of the human heart is the issue that Jesus wanted them to see, so that they might see turn to Him for healing as the soul physician (Luke 5:31).

The big idea in the reading is the difference between following human traditions and dead religion versus possessing a life-giving relationship with the lover of a believer's soul through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were teaching a false message of salvation by works. Their non-gospel would accord well with the "health and wealth" teachers of today or the tendency to reduce God down to a formula. Either way, these false messages set us up to expect God to act in certain

ways based on our good behavior and subtly demand that He hold up His end of the "bargain." Unfortunately, this is a misguided understanding of how to relate to God.

In the opening I mentioned the story of a missionary who walked with God in every way but still experienced tremendous difficulties. As a result of some excellent medical care he was able to receive the liver transplant that he needed to sustain his life. He has recovered and is continuing to serve overseas even in light of the fact that he will remain on rejection drugs and suffer from their side effects for the rest of his life.

I met with Dave recently to discuss what he has learned so far through his experiences. He told me that one of the things that really sustained him was when he called together a group of leaders from his church who prayed over him and anointed him with oil in obedience to what James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Dave said that this really helped him to turn the matter over to God. Second, the church came around him and offered excellent prayer support during his most difficult time. He told me that many people reached out to him and told them that they were praying for him. These things gave him confidence that regardless of what happened it would all be for the glory of God. Interestingly, some of the French people told him everything would turn out okay because, "he was a Christian." These sentiments provided Dave with many teaching moments in which he was able to explain to the people that God allows hardships in the lives of Christians and perhaps even more so than those who don't believe. He knew that everything ultimately would turn out okay, but that believing in God did not guarantee a good and long-lived life.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and good health. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. But we should not live our lives formulaically, doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading James said, *27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27)*. This admonition can weigh heavy on the minds of some Christians because they don't often find themselves busy visiting orphans and widows in distress.

A. In what ways do you obey the spirit of James' calling through the activities that you do engage in for God.

B. In what ways can you create connections in your life between the first part of verse 27 (Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress) and the last part (keep oneself unstained by the world)? List at least two ways in which you do.

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

A. 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?

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

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Today we start with a reading from the mysterious Book of Revelation. In the second reading we see Jesus' victory over death and the repeated theme of how He will ultimately overcome His enemies. In the Gospel lesson we learn how Mary exalted in the Lord her Savior as she prepared to give birth to Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Revelation in which we see a picture of God's ultimate victory over His enemies.

First Reading:

*Revelation 11:19 – 12:7 NAS95 19 And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm. 1 A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; 2 and she was with child; and she *cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. 3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. 4 And his tail *swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne. 6 Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she *had a place prepared by God, so that there she would*

be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. 7 And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war,

Revelation 12:10 NAS95 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.

Although the Church has historically seen this vision from John as Mary, the intention of the author is clearly otherwise as the vision of the woman and the dragon is the first and second of three "signs in heaven" in the Book of Revelation (Rev 12:1, 12:3, and 15:1). Granted, Mary appears directly in Scripture in several places as we will see later in the Gospel reading. However, biblical scholars have since understood the limitations of the allegorical interpretation method which led to the historical understanding of Mary in Revelation 19. The understanding of Revelation, at least as much as it is possible until the events portrayed play out during the end times, is tied to having an intimate understanding of the other parts of the Bible. This is not meant to disparage Mary in any way, rather it is to read and understand the Bible in the way that both the author and the Holy Spirit of God intended.

Avid readers of the New Testament will recognize at the hearing of the phrase "as sign in heaven" in Revelation 12:1 the phrase from the eschatological passages from Matthew, within the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:3-25:46; also, Mark 13:3-37 and Luke 21:5-36). The idea there is that "the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44). At the chronological end of the Discourse, Jesus said the following. "*But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory*" (Matthew 24:29-30). It is a very similar spiritual sign that is in view in today's reading. However, the woman in Revelation is not Jesus but rather the Nation of Israel. Although Mary gave birth to Jesus, it is Israel that gave birth to the twelve tribes of Israel (from 12:1, a woman wearing a garland of 12 stars). The garland is a symbol of victory, here the Nation of Israel is shown in the future as being victorious over her enemies, the dragon (Satan), the antichrist, and the false prophet (the false trinity). We will see further testimony of God's victory in the second reading, "*For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS* FEET (1 Corinthians 15:27).

The reading showed how Israel, who ultimately gave birth to Jesus the Messiah, would be attacked

by Satan who attempted to conquer them through his army of one third of the angels who turned away from God (12:4). In those days God will gather Israel together and divinely protect them (v. 6) from the war in heaven with its far-reaching consequences on earth because of Satan being cast down from heaven to earth after losing the battle with the angel Michael (as we see in the verses beyond today's reading). "*And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him*" Revelation 12:9). Verse 10 in the closing of today's reading affirms this, "for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down."

God is not done with the Nation of Israel and will restore them to their rightful place under the rulership of Jesus at the end of the age as chronicled in the Book of Revelation. As believers in the Lord Jesus, we are called to stand firm and watch for the return of the Lord Jesus, as we know neither the day nor the hour of His return. In our day we continue to see the events portrayed in Revelation begin to play out towards that Day when God will conquer Satan and reverse the fall of Man that began in Genesis 3. God will restore all things but beforehand the time of trouble will overcome the whole world. In the meantime, believers in Jesus are called to testify to the truth of the Gospel that Jesus called us to believe. We are sinners, He calls us to repent of our sins, believe that Jesus died as a payment for our sins, and rose from the dead in victory. He ascended into heaven waiting to return at the time predetermined by God when He will assume His reign over the earth. Until then, we can have hope that God will do what He has promised and will ultimately deliver His people, both the Church and Israel, from their tribulations.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading, we will see more about the Person Jesus Christ, since He was made alive at the resurrection, we too will be made alive when our bodies are resurrected from the dead. The reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's vigorous explanation of the bodily resurrection of believers, first the Lord Jesus and then all people who put their faith in Him. Paul opens this section with a caution to his readers for them to "hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2b,c). The main theme that runs throughout the chapter is that the risen Lord Jesus is the hope of all believers, in spite of the fact that some in the church had denied the teaching of the future resurrection of the dead (v.12). Paul said, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (1Corinthians 15:13-14). He closes the section just before today's reading by saying, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1Corinthians 15:19), something which denies the conventional wisdom of our age that would say that the Christian life is a noble way of living. With these concepts in mind let's move onto today's reading. *Note: Verse 27 which was skipped in the*

reading was provided in order to provide the full context.

Second Reading:

20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. 21 For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, 24 then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be abolished is death. 27 For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. 28 When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

Paul said that since Christ **has** been raised from the dead, is the first One to be resurrected (v.20), He is the one through Whom came life and is a precursor of the hope of resurrection for all who believe (v. 22b, 23). As we saw in the first reading from Revelation, Jesus' rulership will be established on earth, which is one of the aspects of the resurrection. Jesus will "come in glory" (Matthew 25:31). Paul quoted from Psalm 8 when he said that Jesus would totally subdue all of His enemies, "put them under His feet" (vv. 25-26), which is almost exactly what we saw in the Book of Revelation. The three evil persons in Revelation will be subdued and judged forever. The greatest enemy that Jesus will conquer is death through the victory of the resurrection, first Himself and then all believers. The culmination of world history will be marked by the end of Jesus' one thousand-year (millennial) reign on earth. This will be concluded with Christ handing over His kingdom to His Father in heaven (vv.24 -28), something that would fall into the category of what Saint Peter called "things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). After Christ has handed His kingdom over to the Father, His eternal reign will begin (Revelation 21, 22).

As believers, our greatest hope lies in the hope of resurrection. We can rest in the historical fact that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead, something that is one of the best proven historical events throughout all of history. As our bodies wear out and grow old, we can rest in the fact that one day we will be given a new eternal body that will never grow old. In the same way that Paul comforted the Corinthian believers with these facts, we can find comfort and give comfort to other believers through hope in our future resurrection.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading this week tells the story of Mary the mother of Jesus' visit to Elizabeth who was to be the mother of John the Baptist. The context of the reading is that Mary had just been visited by the Angel Gabriel and told how she would be the mother of God's Son Jesus, the Messiah. This reading is very important for Mary because she had just been told this incredible news about how God was going to bring the Messiah into the world through a supernatural, virgin birth. You can imagine that Mary's heart was both elated and confused. Her visit to Elizabeth would have been a comforting and confirming experience to establish her faith in God's unusual method of bringing the Messiah into the world.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 1:39-56 NAS95 39 Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 "And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? 44 "For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45 "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." 46 And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondslave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. 49 "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name. 50 "AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. 51 "He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. 52 "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble. 53 "HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed. 54 "He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever." 56 And Mary stayed with her about three months, and then returned to her home.

When Mary arrived at her relatives' home, Elizabeth was six months pregnant even though she was advanced in age and barren up until that point (Luke 1:36). Elizabeth's greeting would have been confirmation to Mary that God was up to something and her appearance by the Angel Gabriel was not a figment of her imagination. We see a contrast in this passage regarding the response to the Angel Gabriel's messages. Zacharias had not believed Gabriel but instead had asked for a sign (Luke

1:18). Elizabeth said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Mary had immediately believed, "And blessed is she who believed" (v. 45a). She was able to encourage Mary's tender heart of belief that God could do the impossible, especially in light of the fact that she herself was pregnant with her own miracle child.

Elizabeth used this opportunity through the power of the Holy Spirit, to pronounce blessing upon Mary. She said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (v. 42). She also blessed her for believing what God had spoken to her through Gabriel. You can imagine that these pronouncements of blessing would have been important to Mary as she endured much opposition and suspicion over her unusual pregnancy. Mary may have even questioned whether this was a blessing or a curse when she was almost divorced by Joseph and when they had to travel to Bethlehem when she was great with child. The Christmas story is full of difficulties, but this passage reminds us that being in the center of God's will is to be blessed. Circumstances do not determine our favor from the Lord.

Mary, who from all generations past and present is eternally counted as blessed (v. 49) was obedient to God her Savior (v. 47). Mary played a most important role of bringing about the birth of the Lord Jesus, the One Who is to rule and reign upon His return as the spiritual battles play out in heaven and the physical events on earth as the end time events come to their culmination with His ultimate victory.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways can you see the current events of today leading up to the grand battles chronicled in the Book of Revelation?

2. How does understanding Jesus' victory over His enemies help us to accomplish the works that God has in our own lives?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 8-08-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from First Kings in which we find the great Prophet Elijah running away from wicked Queen Jezebel. The story reminds us that God will provide for us in order to accomplish the works that He has in store for us. Then we move to the second reading from Ephesians, which helps us to see what the contrast is between living as a child of the world and living as a child of God. Then we close with the continuing study on Jesus in John 6 where he confronts the unbelieving people by calling Himself the "bread of God."

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Kings and deals with the Prophet Elijah who was a mighty man of God in a dark era in Israel during the decline of the theocratic kingdom. This period followed the time of the Judges in which the Scripture said, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). There were bright spots in this age and one of them was the prophet Elijah. Elijah was perhaps best known for the incident recorded in First Kings 18 during a time of severe famine in Samaria. According to the Scripture Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal as to whether they could bring fire down on their sacrifice by calling on their god while Elijah would offer his sacrifice to God and ask Him to send fire to complete his burnt offering. The Priests of Baal began calling upon their god and cutting themselves in order to invoke a response, but failed miserably. Next, Elijah was so certain the God would act upon his request that he soaked the wood with water (1 Kings 18:33). He prayed a simple prayer and asked God to bring down fire on the sacrifice. With a dramatic display of power, God burned up not only the entire sacrifice, but the fire licked up the water as well. Afterwards, Elijah had the Priests taken captive and then put them to

death (v. 40). What an amazing victory Elijah had that day! After such an important victory one would think that Elijah would have continued his momentum and never suffered from any sort of worry. If God could light even wet wood on fire in front of the pagan priests Elijah could accomplish anything by calling upon the only true God in prayer. At least that is what one may think. Leading up to today's reading, soon afterwards the Scripture records that Elijah fell into a period of deep anxiety because of the actions of a certain ungodly woman named Jezebel. Jezebel was the evil wife of King Ahab, a king of Northern Israel. Immediately after Elijah's victory over the Prophets of Baal, wicked Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time (1 Kings 19:2b). His response was to flee for his life because of Jezebel's threat. "And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers'" (vv. 3-4). Later, Elijah fled even further into the mountains to hide in a cave (1 Kings 19:9). How could such a mighty man of God, who had just witnessed God's dynamic power in the victory over the Prophets of Baal find himself holed up and worrying in a dark cave? If a mighty man of God like Elijah could suffer with anxiety, it's no wonder that Christians can also fall into patterns of worry.

This leads us to today's reading in which we find Elijah on the run from wicked Queen Jezebel.

First Reading:

1 Kings 19:4-8 NAS95 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." 5 He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." 6 Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." 8 So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Even though Elijah was fresh from his mighty victory, he fled in fear to the wilderness and asked the Lord to take his life (v. 4). God responded to his prayer in a different way by sending an angel to provide fresh food for him (vv. 5-6). After Elijah ate and rested the first time, the angel came back to

him again and caused him to eat a second time (v. 7). Subsequent to these two meals, Elijah traveled without food for forty days and nights until he reached Mt. Horeb (v. 8). Evidently, God miraculously delivered Elijah through this extended period of fasting in a similar way that He did when Jesus Christ fasted for a forty-day period (Matthew 4:2). We are not told whether the bread that God provided to Elijah allowed this extended fast but in all likelihood the two meals given to him were for the purpose of lifting his spirits to the point that he continued on his journey to Mt. Horeb. These things happened at the end of Elijah's earthly existence, as shortly after these events he appointed Elisha to be his successor and was then taken up into a cloud.

What can we learn from the reading? Even though we may despair of living because of the impossible obstacles we face, God will provide for us when we call upon Him. He may or may not use his angelic helpers in the way that He did for Elijah, but we can trust that God will not leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). God knows in just what manner and quantity to provide for us the things that will move us to the next step in accomplishing the plans that He has for our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians 4 and shows us the contrast between life as a non-believer and a believer in Christ. It reminds us that our hearts need to be in right relationship with God in order for our outward behavior to reflect God's value system.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 4:30 – 5:2 NAS95 30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

Saint Paul called the people in the Ephesian church not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God by carrying out sinful thoughts in their hearts and engaging in ungodly behaviors. The emphasis for changed

behavior is a changed heart. A changed heart comes from being in a right relationship with God through faith in Christ. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we are "sealed for the day of redemption" by the Holy Spirit (4:30, see also 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14). God has placed upon each believer the seal of redemption through His Holy Spirit and this invisible marking is His certification that He will deliver upon what He has promised. What this means is that we are now inhabited by the very presence of God through His Spirit. Where we go with our thoughts and with our body, we take God with us. Because God lives in us, we are a new creation, the old way of life has gone and a new way of life has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Holy Spirit helps us to see our lives and the world from God's perspective. We can now make decisions based on God's value system, which is in sharp contrast to the world's value system.

Christians are not to have any part in the ungodly behaviors that are associated with the unbelieving world. These behaviors are generated from a "me-first" mentality that is easily offended, resulting in bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice. You can see the progressive nature of sin as it takes on more and more momentum to divide us from others and actually engage in hurtful ways of interacting with others. This is a reflection of the value system of the god of this age, the devil, who is the father of those who do not have God as their father (John 8:44).

Instead, Paul called the people to emulate God through the model of Jesus Christ who willingly sacrificed Himself, not as a victim, but through His own choice (John 10:18). When we receive God's kindness, tenderness, forgiveness and love, we become children of God (John 1:12) and our hearts are shaped by this new value system. We begin to do things more like God our Father and less like our former father. Titus 2:11-13 corroborates this when it says: "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age as we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people of his very own, eager to do good (NIV)."

This means that "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1Corinthians 10:13). In the same way that God provided for Elijah's physical and emotional needs when He asked, God will also provide the things we need in order to serve Him. This includes the ability through His power to forsake the ungodly behaviors that Paul listed in the reading.

How can we apply this to our lives? This reading is helpful to consider as we interact with others throughout the week and before we partake of communion. God's love transforms how we approach relationships and the community of believers. Communion has in its very word the idea of common unity. The church comes together to participate in remembering God's way of interacting with us, which is typified by Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins. As a result, our way of interacting with others changes as well. Communion reminds us of Jesus' admonition in Matthew's Gospel about asking forgiveness from a person we may have offended before we bring an offering to God. "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matthew 5:23-24). When we partake of communion we shouldn't grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30) by clinging to ungodly feelings towards others and bringing this into the celebration of remembrance of our Lord's death which took the place for the penalty for our sins. Instead of coming with thoughts of wrath, anger, slander, and bitterness (vv. 30 – 31) we have been changed so that we can come with minds cleansed from these things and present to God hearts filled with kindness, tenderness forgiveness, and love (vv. 32 – 4:1).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is a continuation of the story that was started last week. The context is Jesus' teaching of the crowds that followed him after His feeding of them through the multiplying of the loaves and fishes in the closing of Chapter 5.

Gospel Reading:

John 6:41-51 NAS95 41 Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven." 42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?" 43 Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. 47 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which

I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."

The main point of Jesus' teaching is that belief in Him is the only way to obtain eternal life and be restored to right relationship with God the Father. Repeating our statement from last week, Jesus' point in this particular teaching wasn't whether or not He is spiritually present in the elements of communion. These issues were not even a part of the mentality of the Jewish people that He was addressing.

The passage opens with the grumbling of the Jews in disbelief against Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. They point to His human origins as proof that He could not be God's promised Messiah (v. 42). They believed that only God or possibly an angel can come down from heaven. Since some in the crowd knew Jesus' earthly father and mother they couldn't accept His statement that He came down from heaven. We know from John 7 that the people held to a tradition about the nature of the Messiah. There they said, "However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from" (John 7:27). Jesus cut to the heart of the issue which was their unbelief in God. Earlier Jesus had told them:

John 5:37-40 NAS95 37 "And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. 38 You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. 39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; 40 and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life."

This leads us to the central point of the story: the only way to God the Father is through belief in Jesus the Son (v. 47). For "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Jesus said that they could not come to Him because the Father was not drawing them (v. 44). But we know that God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). It seems that their hard-heartedness and lack of being willing to be "taught of God" was preventing them from being drawn to faith in Jesus. If they would let themselves hear and learn from the Father, then Christ's divinity would be obvious to them. Then they would come to Him and have assurance of a life that is eternal (v. 44b). By offering resurrection life, Jesus is overtly claiming His deity. He continues to make claims of divinity by saying that He is the One who was sent by the Father and has seen Him (vv. 45-46). It is with this backdrop that Jesus makes a bold claim, emphasized by the phrase, "Truly, truly," which is basically putting His word on the same level as Holy Scripture, infallible and inerrant. He says, "he who believes has eternal life" (v. 47).

In order to unpack this a little more, he uses an analogy that the Jews would have been familiar with from the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). He harkens back to the days when the Hebrew people were in the wilderness and ate manna, which was a supernatural food that God provided for them (see Mass notes from last week). Even though they ate this supernatural food, their bodies still died. Jesus was claiming to be more than manna, He is the "manna" (or bread) that brings life to the soul (John 10:10). Being in relationship to Him who is the resurrection and the life, allows one to live eternally, even if the body dies (John 11:25). When Jesus said "and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh," he was referring to His bodily sacrifice that He would make to bring atonement for our sins. The Old Testament set a precedent for the need for a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22). So Jesus was showing that His impending death would be that sacrifice required by the Law to forgive us of our sins (1 John 2:2).

What can we learn from this reading to apply to our lives? When we celebrate communion we remember how Jesus gave up His life to bear the penalty for our sins. When we take of the bread, we remember His body that was broken on the cross for us. When we partake of the cup, we remember Jesus' blood that was poured out for us. Before we partake of communion we should examine our hearts in preparation. We can ask ourselves if we too have become so familiar with Jesus that we overlook that He is God? In addition, when this world starts getting to us, we can look to Him for life that is truly life, realizing that this world is not our home. We walk by faith that someday we will be with Him and all things will be made right. We can also be a spokesperson for God, sharing with others the wonderful opportunity to be made right with the Father through Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. We said about the second reading:

God has placed upon each believer the seal of redemption through His Holy Spirit and this invisible marking is His certification that He will deliver upon what He has promised. What this means is that we are now inhabited by the very presence of God through His Spirit. Where we go with our thoughts and with our body, we take God with us. Because God lives in us, we are a new creation, the old way of life has gone and a new way of life has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Holy Spirit helps us to see our lives and the world from God's perspective. We can now make decisions based on God's value system, which is in sharp contrast to the world's value system.

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In what ways do you bring God into your relationships? In your work life? In your relationship with you wife? In relationship to nonbelievers?

2. Reflect upon the last time you celebrated communion. Was your heart focused upon the Lord Jesus' sacrifice for you?

Saint Paul gave us a clue as to the importance of the celebration of communion. He said in 1 Corinthians 11:30 about those who were doing so in an unholy manner, "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." Although his words were in the context of the full love feast he indicated the sincere need to examine our motives as we celebrate communion. In light of what we studied today, the next time you take communion examine your heart and sincerely prepare for the remembrance of Jesus dying on the cross for you sins.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-01-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Exodus, where God performed a miracle to feed the multitude of Hebrew people who had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt. We then move to the letter that Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians, where he describes what being a Christian looks like, contrasting new life in Christ to the old way of life in darkness. Finally, we conclude with Jesus' declaration that he is bread from heaven, harkening back to the manna that was described in the first reading from Exodus.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus. The Hebrew people had just been delivered from the captivity of the Egyptians. God raised up Moses to lead His people out of Egypt. As we will see, even though God performed many miraculous signs and provisions in this first phase of the Exodus the people quickly complained against Him and wanted to return to their captivity. As you read, ask yourself in what ways you too find it easy to complain about God's ways and would wish to return to captivity's predictability.

First Reading:

Exodus 16:1-15 NAS95 1 Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. 2 The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. 5 "On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily." 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, "At evening you will know that the LORD has brought you out of the land of Egypt; 7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, for He hears your grumblings against the LORD; and what are we, that you grumble against us?" 8 Moses said, "This will happen when the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the LORD hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the LORD." 9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, 'Come near before the LORD, for He has heard your grumblings.'" 10 It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. 11 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 12 "I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" 13 So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground. 15 When the sons of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.

The Hebrew people were in an interesting transition All of their lives, they had been slaves. Now slavery is not desirable in any context, but it is predictable and structured. You don't have to make any decisions, everything is decided for you. In the midst of the oppression, though, your basic needs are taken care of. While it was not luxurious living, the Hebrew slaves had a sense of security that was no longer available to them in their new-found freedom. Instead of looking at all that God had done to deliver them from their oppression and trust Him for their daunting future, they chose to rehearse the "good" points of their slavery (the security of food and shelter) and accused God of not caring about them.

This wasn't an isolated instance of grumbling, rather the text says, "The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness" (v. 2). In spite of their hard hearts, God heard the people and answered by telling Moses that He would "rain bread from heaven for you" even in the case when they did not obey Him (v. 4), which He knew they wouldn't. Moses explained to them that their complaints weren't against him but against God (v. 8). God made a special provision to provide for the sabbath by making the manna quantitatively different (a double portion) on the day before as well as qualitatively different – it would not spoil during the sabbath rest day. God then announced the miracle to Moses through the appearance of the Shekinah glory which the people saw (v. 10). In the meantime, in the evening before the raining of the manna from the sky began, God sent quail to the people (v. 13). The text concluded with the people seeing the manna and not recognizing what it was until Moses explained it to them (v. 15). The word "manna" in Hebrew means "what is it." As you can imagine, this was an extraordinary way for God to provide for His people. God seems to work in very unexpected ways.

There are many spiritual parallels in this reading between the provision of God through the manna and the person and work of Jesus Christ who, as we will see in the Gospel reading, called Himself "the bread of life" (John 6:35). In spite of the fact that the people grumbled against God He still provided food for them. The parallel in the New Testament is that in spite of the fact that most of the people didn't accept Jesus as their Messiah, God still provided salvation through Him. The manna was a very unique provision that was done only by God and could not come about by any natural means. In the same way, Jesus was God's supernatural provision and also did not come about by natural means but was instead born through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians and the context is Paul's teaching on the spiritual unity of believers in the church and the unique calling to which God calls His people to walk together in a

new way outside of sensual and greedy practices.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 4:17-24 NAS95 17 So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, 18 being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; 19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Paul typified the Gentiles as unbelievers who "walk[ed] in the futility of their mind[s], being darkened in their understanding" of the true salvation that comes only from God (v. 17). Their behavior is typical of the qualities displayed in the unbelieving world, and even among the grumbling Hebrews about whom we read in the first reading. In contrast, believers are called to set aside their former practices and walk in the newness of life, being renewed in their spirits and to put on the "new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (v. 24). Like the manna in the desert on the six day which was qualitatively different, believers are also called to be different from unbelievers who by their nature embrace ungodly behaviors because of the spiritual darkness that reigns in their hearts. As believers in Jesus, we now have a new nature in us. In order to understand our new nature, we must learn the truth about our identity in Christ, which Paul says begins when our minds are renewed. This renewing of our minds is why Bible study, prayer and being with other believers is so important for our growth in the Christian life. These practices help us to begin to see things as God sees them and then our lives become transformed as we let His ways be our ways (Romans 12:1-3).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John 6 where Jesus reveals to the people the parallel between God's provision of the manna in the desert and to Himself as the "bread of life" that provides eternal life through faith in Him. Knowing what happened in the story before we pick up the reading will be

helpful. The immediate context of today's reading is just after the multiplying of the loaves and fishes in the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15). Afterwards Jesus fled from there because He sensed that the people were going to take Him by force to make Him their king (v. 15). Jesus, though, did not leave the region with the disciples on their boat, but he nonetheless showed up on the other side with them. This is why they ask Him when he got there and explains why they are confused in today's reading (v. 25). It was during this time that a storm arose and the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water (v. 19). Jesus got into the boat which was then immediately at the opposite shore (v. 21). In this instance, the text says that Jesus wasn't in the boat and never mentioned whether or not He calmed the sea (refer to Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25, and Matthew 8:23-27). But from these other references, we know that Jesus was able to do miraculous things, which was part of Him showing His legitimate right to claim Himself as the Messiah.

Gospel Reading:

John 6:24-35 NAS95 24 So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus. 25 When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" 26 Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. 27 Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal." 28 Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." 30 So they said to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? 31 "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.'" 32 Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. 33 "For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." 34 Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread." 35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst."

Before we study the text, note that Jesus' point in this particular teaching wasn't whether or not He is spiritually present in the elements of communion. The main point of Jesus' teaching is that belief in Him is the only way to obtain eternal life through the Father God. Even though some of the people were familiar with Jesus, this shouldn't have stopped them from seeing the miraculous signs that He was doing and how His work confirmed the teaching of the Old Testament (John 6:45).

The reading is the third of many misunderstandings that the people had about Jesus and the nature of the promised Messiah. In each case Jesus uses a common symbol to describe a spiritual reality. The first time this happened was back in Chapter 3 during His discussion with Nicodemus who misunderstood Jesus' reference to spiritual birth. Jesus explained the need to be born again or from above (John 3:3). The second case was Jesus' interaction with a Samaritan woman where Jesus equated trusting Him with "living water" that would satisfy the unquenchable thirst of the human soul (John 4:6-29). The symbolism that Jesus was using here with the Samaritan woman and the water was an illustration of the eternal life that can only come through faith in Him. Like Nicodemus (and to the Jews in today's reading), this connection between a concrete substance (birth, bread, water) and a spiritual reality wasn't obvious to the woman because she asked him to give her the water so she wouldn't have to keep coming to the well (John 4:15). Jesus gave a clue to His disciples about what was to come shortly after this interaction when they urged Him to eat something (John 4:31). Jesus answered them by saying, "I have food to eat that you do not know about," and "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work" (John 4:32, 34).This is very similar to what happened in the story today but instead of water Jesus used the symbolism of bread. This opens the next chapter in which Jesus feeds the people with physical food to provide for their temporal needs but unveils their greater need of eternal life through faith in God's only spiritual provision: Jesus, the heavenly manna.

Paul sheds light on these allusions from Israel's past for those of us who are reading this as Gentiles, without the history of the Jewish people as our backdrop. He gave the following explanation about the water, manna, and the people's unbelief in Exodus about which we read in the first reading:

1 Corinthians 10:1-5 NAS95 1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

Paul wanted New Testament believers to understand the spiritual heritage and to learn from the mistakes that led to disbelief and rejection of God's provision for their lives. Therefore, it is important to understand this passage in light of the broader context of Jewish history. Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah, God's special and chosen servant to deliver people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). What they expected of the Messiah and what Jesus portrayed were two very different things. The people had a hard time accepting that God's unexpected ways (faith in the suffering servant as explained in Isaiah 53) was better than their visions of Messiah (a political ruler who would take care of their physical and material needs).

In today's story, people from among the five thousand whom Jesus fed earlier were searching for him (v. 24) Their reaction to finding Jesus miraculously on the other side of the lake was not what we would expect. They did not ask Him **how** He got there but rather **when** He got there, trying to piece together a plausible explanation (v. 25). Jesus didn't bother to answer their impertinent question, but rather cut to the heart of the matter of their deep spiritual need. They were overcome by their desire for physical bread, but Jesus saw their more critical need, spiritual food that would lead to eternal restoration and life. They followed Jesus there because they desired to eat their fill of the bread that He gave them last time, so Jesus explained to them that their physical need for bread was minor compared to their need for spiritual restoration with their Heavenly Father that came only from God. Jesus told them that although they saw the signs He did they still didn't believe in Him as the Messiah from God, but rather approached Him as their physical provider, a sort of genie on demand (v. 26). Remember that Jesus had to flee from them right after the feeding of the five thousand because He knew that they were going to try and make Him their civil King because they saw Him as their provider. Instead of going along with their folly, Jesus instead told them, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (v. 27).

Looking back to the manna in the desert, had the people not been so hard hearted they could have better understood God's provision. In the case of the manna it was collected for the first five days of the week and went bad overnight. But on the sixth day God provided a double amount of a special type which was preserved for a two-day period in order to provide for a sabbath rest day. In the spiritual sense Jesus is our special manna, the one who provides our eternal Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4). The people in this story then bullheadedly asked Jesus for another sign, an attitude about which Jesus said later, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet" (Matthew 12:39). Jesus answered their request for a sign with an explanation of how God's provision of manna was similar to the spiritual nourishment that He desired to give them, if they would ask God to change their hearts so they could listen and receive God's provision to them through Christ as Messiah. We will see next week in verse 44 that Jesus continues to explain the way to God through Him by saying, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." Jesus addresses their need for restoration in their relationship with the Father by referring back to Israel's history and said, "He gave them bread out of heaven to eat" (v. 31).

The people responded to Jesus' illustration of Himself as their spiritual bread in a similar way as did the Samaritan woman saying, "Lord, always give us this bread." Jesus answered them by using language which included the information about His interaction with the Samaritan woman and the sign of the living water. This he most likely did for the benefit of His disciples who had still not understood the sign of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 8:17 – 21). Jesus used an "I am" statement which strongly indicated His divinity, saying "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me

will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst" (v. 34). Jesus was the double provision of the special manna that didn't perish on the sixth day that nourished the people into their Sabbath rest. The work of God is not "works", for Jesus clarified this in verse 29: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." Jesus explained that the way to God was uniquely through faith in Him.

We will see this claim better next week as we study the continuation of Jesus' teaching on this matter where Jesus said, "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and **believes** in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (v. 40). The heart of the matter was **belief** in Jesus as the one and only Son of the Father, the only One through Whom came eternal life. Though the people sought physical bread to satisfy their physical needs, Jesus cut to their greater need of spiritual healing which came only through belief in Him as the only way to God.

What does this mean for our lives? The main point of the reading was Jesus' profound statement that belief in Him as a type of spiritual manna was the only means of finding peace and eternal life with God. Unlike Nicodemus who seemingly believed Jesus later in his life (John 19:39), and the Samaritan woman who believed in Jesus immediately after listening to Him, many of the people in this story didn't believe and separated themselves from Him. This is evident in the infamous John 6-6-6- verse: "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." After this statement Saint Peter boldly identified Jesus as the Christ, saying, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68c – 69).

To whom will you go? Will you seek eternal life through the machinations of being a good person and observing religious activities? Will you be like the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus who surrendered their lives to the person of Jesus Christ, or will you respond like many in the crowd that separated themselves from Jesus because their Messiah didn't measure up to their expectations? Later in this discourse Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). May we be convinced from this passage to seek eternal life through faith in the One and Only means, Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

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1. What parallels do you see between the people of our day who want God on their own terms and the hard-hearted people of Israel in the Old and New Testament readings? What does the Ephesian's passage say about this way of thinking?

2. How can you be part of bringing a message of hope and light to people who are approaching God with an expectation of God being a genie on demand (and often being disillusioned with God's unexpected ways of interacting with them)? Are there areas of your own life that you need to work through disillusionment with the Lord's unexpected ways so that you can be freed up to minister to others authentically in their own struggles with surrendering to God?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-25-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we see in the first reading a miracle by the Prophet Elisha in multiplying of the loaves to feed a large crowd. Later in the Gospel lesson we see Jesus doing something similar but on a larger scale in the feeding of the five thousand. We also study Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and see some godly behaviors to which God calls us to walk as His true followers.

Two years ago this month I was able to take an extended holiday to the south of France along with my wife. During this time, I was able to unplug from my work in the IT industry and to meet up with a couple who is involved that country. This loving couple epitomizes the calling given by Paul that

we will see in the second reading today "*to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love*" (Ephesians 4:1c-2). In spite of their many hardships they have endured during their forty years of ministry in France they have persisted and seen many people grow in their faith. They are an inspiration to me when I too encounter difficulties in helping people to grow in their faith.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Second Kings in the section where Elijah's replacement Elisha ministered during the time of a great famine. Elisha was a great prophet who provided for the people in a similar way in which Jesus did in the feeding of the five thousand which we will read later in the Gospel lesson. Elisha performed this miracle right after he raised the son of the Shunammite woman and the rendering of a poison pot of stew into healthy food.

First Reading:

2 Kings 4:42-44 NAS95 42 Now a man came from Baal-shalishah, and brought the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And he said, "Give them to the people that they may eat." 43 His attendant said, "What, will I set this before a hundred men?" But he said, "Give them to the people that they may eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left over.'" 44 So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD.

Here Elisha multiplied through God's power some twenty barley loaves into a quantity sufficient to feed one hundred men and most likely their women and children. God used Elisha in many such ways to reveal His power and to call the people to follow the One True God. In a similar way, Jesus used signs to reveal the source of His true power and to point the people to faith in Him (=God). Elisha was different though because he rightly didn't claim to be God or the Messiah but rather pointed the way to Him through the revelation of His power through signs and miracles.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians 4. The context is following Paul's stating of the revelation of the mystery of God that the Gentiles were fellow heirs with the Jews in the kingdom of God (Ephesians 4:6). Paul explained that he was a minister to the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:8) and how he prayed that the Ephesians would understand the riches of God's glory and to "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (3:19).

Second Reading:

Ephesians 4:1-6 NAS95 1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

God calls us to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (v. 1). What is this calling? The key lies in the adverb "therefore." As we have seen in previous editions of Mass Notes we have to ask "what is it there for"? In this case it links this passage to the previous doctrine described in chapter 3: "8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:8-10). God is making a point to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places (the supernatural realm) about Who He is through the church (you and me and fellow believers). It's not just about me and what I get out of my church experience. Instead, my life becomes about walking in a way that reflects God's glory to the observant supernatural realm. What does this look like? Paul said it includes attitudes of humility, gentleness, having patience, "showing tolerance for one another in love," and working to preserve unity "in the bond of peace."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is Jesus' feeding of the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. This chapter of John marks the beginning of a series of turning points and especially the one we will study in future weeks in an easy to remember chapter and verse: 6:66. These turning points come about as the people begin to determine in their hearts whether they are true followers of Jesus. One

of these turning points occurred in the previous chapter. "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18). This is where the rubber meets the road; the true followers of God are those that recognize Jesus as God in the flesh, the Messiah, rather than just a miracle doer who they though would deliver them from their Roman oppressors.

Gospel Reading:

John 6:1-15 NAS95 1 After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). 2 A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick. 3 Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. 5 Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" 6 This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. 7 Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." 8 One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, 9 "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" 10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. 11 Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. 12 When they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost." 13 So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. 14 Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." 15 So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

As the story progressed, Jesus asked Philip (who was from this region) to provide for the crowd. Philip responded to Jesus showing that he had resources in the amount of 200 days wages, a significant amount but worthless that far away from the city and in light of the huge size of the crowd. Evidently, the disciples two by two ministry in the preceding weeks had been fruitful in terms of donations. Nevertheless, the people had followed Jesus some distance away from the city and saw Him as One Who would provide for them, so it was natural for Jesus to accommodate their needs through His disciples. In this case, the people found out that God was the true multiplier of things. The people did indeed recognize Jesus as a Prophet, seemingly the One prophesied about in Deuteronomy 18:15. However, they misunderstood the role of the Messiah (vv. 14 – 15). The people saw in Jesus a political ruler Who could free them from their poverty and Roman oppression. In the end, twelve baskets were left over corresponding exactly to the count of Jesus' disciples. Each

disciple was left with one basket to highlight Jesus' ability to provide in the midst of impossible circumstances. God provided the food regardless of the people's faith and used this sign to point to the True Messiah Jesus.

We too may have misunderstandings about how Jesus' power should be used in the world. Though we should ask God to provide for our circumstances we have to recognize that like the people of the biblical era we often want God to use His power for our comfort, security, and advancement. We need to careful to let God be God and not expect Him to be our personal "Genie in the bottle" performing miracles on demand. Nobody stands above for His is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and His purposes are beyond understanding. Even though the people in this story wanted Jesus to become their civil King, instead Jesus ministered to them to meet their spiritual needs. One day Jesus will return to rule and reign on the earth and fulfil the expectations of a perfect ruler.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading we read God's calling for us to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (Ephesians 4:1). List some ways in which you may walk in a manner worthy of a heavenly calling. What are some specifics things to which God may be calling you to change in your life?

2. In the Gospel lesson Jesus called upon God's miraculous power to perform a miracle to provide for people's basic needs and at the same time to confirm Himself as the Messiah. It is evident from reading the synoptic Gospels that His disciples didn't understand the miracle until Jesus explained it to them some time later after feeding a second large crowd. What ways have you missed understanding the miracles of God in your own life? List two or three ways in which God has recently provided for you that you may have taken for granted. Tell God your thankfulness for His provision and ask Him to point out to you ways in which He continues to do so.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-18-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a message from Jeremiah regarding the ungodly rulers of Judah which includes a message of restoration under a future ruler sent by God whom we know as Jesus Christ. Then we look at how Jesus removed the wall of separation between God and the Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which Jesus' apostles rest period is interrupted by the incessant needs of the people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. The context is Jeremiah's proclamation of condemnation of the civil rulers, since later in verse 9 (after today's reading) he condemns the prophets (Jeremiah 23:9). This section is the prophet's condemnation of the last five kings of Judah. Included in the gloom is a message of hope and restoration especially that of the reign of ruler called the "righteous Branch."

First Reading:

Jeremiah 23:1-6 NAS95 1 "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the LORD. 2 Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: "You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and

have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds," declares the LORD. 3 "Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD. 5 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, 'The LORD our righteousness.'"

The rulers of Judah during this time were exceedingly evil, and God blamed them for the ultimate scattering of the tribe to Babylon which happened during the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC. God then promises to rebuild the fallen nation by regathering them under the rulership of "David a righteous Branch" (v. 5). This prophecy points clearly to the future reign of Jesus Christ on earth after His return. Jesus will "reign as a king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land" and be called by the name "The LORD our righteousness." One day the Nation of Israel will be restored under the righteous rulership of Jesus Christ. Israel will awaken to the identity of the Ruler whom they rejected. Zechariah said it this way: "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn" (Zechariah 12:10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The context is Paul's message of hope to the Gentiles who were formerly "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12).

Second Reading:

Ephesians 2:13-18 NAS95 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one body to God through

the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

God through Jesus' finished work of redemption on the cross made one "church" out of the formerly separate Jews and Gentiles. This one group of believers were united through the ministry of Jesus who "preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (v. 17). The two groups are now provided access to God the Father through the single Holy Spirit. As believers in Jesus Christ we are united with all of the believers that ever existed or exist in the universe. Ultimately, we will be joined into one kingdom under the rulership of Jesus, the "Righteous Branch" as we read in the first reading.

As believers in the twenty first century we may forget just how separate the first century Gentile believers felt from the Jews. All along God had created the Law to separate the Jews from the surrounding world. He did this through the creation of things like food laws, moral laws, and ceremonial laws. During the time when this was written the temple in Jerusalem was functioning and the Gentiles were prohibited with the penalty of death from entering past a certain point. Through Jesus Christ they were now granted access to the Holy of Holies Who dwelled behind the curtain of the temple, what Paul described in this reading as the "dividing wall." This wall of separation was broken down through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul said in Romans, "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). He went on to say, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him" (Romans 10:12). Jesus is the One that unites all believers through faith in Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter 6 and the context is just after the apostles had returned from going out two by two to preach the message of repentance to the Jews. It seems that God had opened the hearts of the people to receive their message for it seems that Judas the treasurer had acquired at least two hundred denarii with which to be able to volunteer to buy bread for the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:37). Their ministry was to preach repentance, cast out demons, anoint people with oil and heal them (Mark 6:12 – 13).

Gospel Reading:

Mark 6:30-34 NAS95 30 The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. 31 And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) 32 They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves. 33 The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.

Upon the return from their ministry the apostles reported to Jesus about their ministry. Jesus, knowing they were tired, called them away to a time of refreshing away from the presence of the people who it seems began coming to them in crowds (v. 34). Their rest and solitude was short lived though, as the crowds continued to come to Jesus and the apostles to the extent that they anticipated their movements (v. 33). Saint John provided a clue that the reason the crowds were so evident was because they were gathering in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover (John 6:4). Jesus accommodated the people's great needs because "they were like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34b). The main point was that the spiritual teachers of the age had left the preaching of the true ministry of God. Jesus came to awaken the people to their true needs, to repent of their sins and to turn to God in faith.

How many times has God called us to set aside our preconceived notions about what we planning to do in certain circumstances? How many times have we settled down with a good book during a long airplane ride only to be disturbed by someone in an adjacent seat trying to strike up a conversation with us? As you go through the activities of the week, try to find circumstances in which you sense God would have you go in a different direction. Rather than being disturbed by disruptive circumstances, pray to find God's hand in what He would have for you in the unexpected event. Though all of us need times of rest, pray that you don't allow your preconceived time of rest to hinder what God would have you do during an interruption, even if you don't understand the reason or even the outcomes.

I remember one afternoon while I was driving home from work in suburban Detroit I saw a young woman alongside the road with a flat tire. Though I wanted to drive on past something within me caused me to stop and volunteer to change the tire. As I began my work, I had in the car some worn out gloves and placed those on my hands. One of the gloves had a hole in the hand and as I was removed the worn out tire from her car some of the steel from the belting found its way through that hole and into my hand making a nice cut. I didn't say anything but internally cried out in pain. Meanwhile the woman's boyfriend pulled up and stood by talking to her and watched me finish the job without saying anything to me. Between the pain of the pricks in my hand through the "holy" gloves and the awkwardness of having her boyfriend watching me I wondered why I had stopped in

the first place. There was a racial element in place as well. Although I didn't understand any of the implications of what I did I still followed through with what God put on my heart to accomplish. I could have simply continued my leisurely drive home to my cushy suburban condo. Instead, I drive home with a bleeding hand and with uncertain kinds of metal fibers embedded along with a healthy helping of grease. When I get to heaven I plan to ask Jesus in what ways he used my service in the lives of these young people that afternoon. Until then I am called to do the things that God puts on my heart regardless of my understanding of the reason.

Reflection Questions

1. One of the things with which I have struggled is with the strong sense of separation I felt after leaving my job at Ford Motor Company as an engineer after a tenure of nine years. During this time, much of my life revolved around the people at my workplace. Once I surrendered my magic ID card which provided me access to things like the revolving gate in the engineering center and the test track across the street I felt a deep sense of separation. Through the years after my separation I have attempted to make peace with my decision as I kept in contact with a small group of people back at the company. After I came to faith in Jesus I found that I could deal with my decision much more easily in part because I discovered that God had brought me into contact with this large group of people in order to intercede for them in prayer. At times I still have dreams about being locked out of the company gate without an ID card to get through the turn style security gate.

A. In what ways have you found yourself separated from others in your life? How has your personal relationship with Jesus helped you through these trials?

B. Consider some ways in which you can use this separation in a positive way.

2. What do the first century Gentile believers have with groups of believers in our world such as the Chinese or Iranian Christians? In what ways does Jesus provide hope to them that we perhaps have difficulty in understanding?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-11-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with Amos 7: 12-15 as Amos, a simple farmer, is called by God to prophesy in Israel. Then we move to Ephesians 1:3-14 where Paul explains all the blessings that are available to those who are in Christ. Finally, we conclude with Mark 6: 7-13. Here Jesus sends out His disciples to minister and instructs them to trust God for their daily needs as they call people to repentance.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Imagine you are an ordinary farmer, minding your own business, tending your sheep and your crops. Suddenly God commands you to go to a neighboring land and pronounce judgment on its rebellious people. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news. Yet sometimes God called men to be prophets, foretelling God's plan and delivering God's words of warning and judgment. God's intention was never to simply punish people. His ultimate desire was to restore His wayward children back to Himself. Amos, however, was not a prophet, nor even the son of a prophet. He was simply a farmer trying to make a living in Judah during the time of the divided kingdom.

You may remember that the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms due to the sin of King Solomon. Ten tribes became the Northern Kingdom and were collectively called Israel. The remaining two tribes made up the Southern Kingdom and were known as Judah. In a strange twist, God called this farmer from Judah to go to Israel and prophesy against them.

At first, Amos pronounced God's judgment on Israel's enemies. No one objected to that. But then he began to recite the sins of Israel. Amos first reminded them of all God had done for them. He had released them from bondage in Egypt, defeated their enemies, given them land, and raised up prophets among them. Yet Israel rebelled. It wasn't that they had completely forgotten God. They still performed their religious rituals. But while claiming to belong to God, Israel oppressed the righteous, deprived the poor of justice, worshipped idols, and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

Religious ritual unaccompanied by love for God and concern for the oppressed does not impress God. He despised Israel's religious hypocrisy. When He used His plumb line (standard of holiness) to evaluate Israel, her crookedness was revealed. Amos warned them that God's judgment would surely come. Their king Jeroboam would die by the sword, and Israel would be taken captive by its enemy.

In the First Reading, Amaziah, a priest of Israel who should have been open to the message of the Lord, instead commanded Amos to cease prophesying and go home. Though Amos conceded he was a farmer and not a prophet, he knew God had called him to prophesy. He would prove faithful to that call despite opposition.

First Reading:

Amos 7:12-15 NAS95 12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! 13 "But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence." 14 Then Amos replied to Amaziah, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. 15 "But the LORD took me from following the flock and the LORD said to me, 'Go prophesy to My people Israel.'"

We are prophets in a sense, bringing God's message of salvation to those around us. This message is a mixture of bad news and good news. The wages of our sin is death, St. Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, and if we continue in our rebellion against God, we will surely die. That is very bad news. But the good news is in that same verse: "*…the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord*." God has called each one of us to bear this news to the whole world. Will we be faithful to the call?

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

Some time ago I enjoyed visiting Moody Bible Institute in Chicago when my daughter Emily was a student there. Because Moody is located near the center of one of the largest cities in America, the security on campus is tight, especially in the areas where students live and hang out. Students carry a pass card that allows them access to all the restricted areas. I was an outsider there, but as long as I was with Emily I could enjoy free access to all the college offered: I could visit the dorms, go to chapel, attend classes, eat in the cafeteria, and have coffee at Joe's Coffee Shop. Nothing was kept from me as long as I was with Emily. Without her, I would be on the outside separated from the rich experience Moody offers. I could claim no right to these blessings. But as long as I was with her, all the blessings that were hers were mine, too.

Abundant blessing and privilege exists in the spiritual realm, but in ourselves, we have no right to it. Without Christ, we are on the outside and without hope. In the Second Reading Paul tells the church in Ephesus that God's plan from the foundation of the world was to include them (and us) in these great blessings.

As you read the Second Reading, notice the richness of these spiritual blessings which can be ours in abundance. Note the words *every, all, riches, lavished, fullness.* Observe the words that indicate how intentional God was to bless us—*He chose us, He predestined us, He purposed, according to the kind intention of His will.* And notice how many times the words *in Christ* are used for it is only through Christ that we have access to His abundant blessings.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 1:3-14 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance,

having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Can you fathom the blessings that are ours in Christ?

v. 5 adoption as sons – When we trust in Christ and His death on the cross for us, we become members of God's family with all the rights and privileges of adult sons.

v. 7 *redemption through His blood* – Redemption has the idea of buying someone from the slave market and setting them free. We were slaves to sin, but God paid the price for us by sending Jesus to die in our place. He has purchased us with His blood and set us free to serve Him.

v. 7 *the forgiveness of our trespasses* – We don't deserve forgiveness, but this is evidence of His abundant grace which He lavishes upon us.

v. 11 *an inheritance* – This is ours because in Christ we have been made a child of God. This inheritance, St. Peter explains in 1 Peter 1:4, "is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you."

v. 13 *sealed with the Holy Spirit* –We are sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit who comes to live in every believer. Our position in Christ is secure.

St. Paul explains the *pass card* that gives us access to God's abundant blessings:

"…after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians

1:13-14)

We hear the message of salvation, we believe it, and are saved and sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Christ's standing before God is our standing, His inheritance is our inheritance, and His riches are our riches. God lavished them on us, because we are in Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus sent out the 12 disciples two by two as His representatives and under His authority. Their mission was a spiritual one. They would be taking the good news of Jesus to the lost. Naturally Satan and his demons would be opposing them at every turn, but Jesus gave his disciples power over these dark spiritual forces.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 6:7-13 NAS95 7 And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; 8 and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff–no bread, no bag, no money in their belt– 9 but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." 10 And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. 11 Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." 12 They went out and preached that men should repent. 13 And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

The disciples were to take nothing for their journey—no food, money, or extra clothing. Commentators have posed three reasons for what seems to us a strange command. First, extra possessions are an encumbrance. We have probably all experienced times when, instead of owning our possessions, they owned us. Our possessions require care and maintenance, consuming time and money and distracting us from more important matters of life. Are my possessions being used to serve God or are they distracting me from ministry? The disciples were to take nothing extra that could encumber them.

Second, the disciples were to go out in complete dependence on God's power and provision. One of the hallmarks of Jesus' life on earth was that He lived in complete dependence upon the Father (John 5:19, 5:30, 7:16). The disciples were to do likewise, depending on God for their daily provisions.

And third, Jesus established the principle that the minister of God is to be supported by the people to whom he ministers. It was appropriate for the disciples to enjoy the hospitality and provision of the ones who were receiving the blessings of their ministry.

If a city or household rejected the disciples and their message, the disciples were to shake the dust off the soles of their feet as they left. *Jews sometimes shook the dust off their clothing when returning from Gentile lands as a sign of contempt.** When the disciples did it, it was a sign of judgment. The disciples' message of salvation was often accompanied by miracles. Rejecting the message in the face of supernatural authentication indicated an intractable heart. Those who rejected the disciples were ultimately rejecting the One who sent them. And when people reject Jesus, they are rejecting the only provision for their sin. By shaking the dust off their feet, the disciples were communicating a warning: *We offered you what you needed for salvation, but you turned it down. The responsibility for your sins remains on your shoulders. Judgment is coming. We have nothing more to offer you.*

It is a moment none of us would want to face. And we don't have to if we repent and believe.

*See https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/reformation-study-bible/Matt.10.14-Matt.10.15

Reflection Questions

1. Which of the blessings listed in Ephesians 1 are you most thankful for and why?

2. If God were to send you out to minister, which of your possessions would be most difficult to leave behind? What could you do this week to decrease your attachment to things and increase your dependence upon God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 07-04-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about the commission of the prophet Ezekiel. Then we study the value of weakness in the life of Paul and by application how God uses it for our good. We close with a study of Mark's Gospel in which we see the rejection of Jesus' message by those close to him from His own home town.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is the opening of his prophecy and would have been written after he had been carried off captive to Babylon in 597 BC. Ezekiel said in 1:1 that he was 30 years old when he began his ministry, the same age as when the priests begin working in their position. Ezekiel was unique in that he held both offices, that of prophet and priest (see Ezekiel 1:3). The young man Ezekiel wrote of the visions he received from God while he "by the river Chebar among the exiles" (1:1). Today's reading is God's commissioning of Ezekiel to speak to the Nation of Israel that was in the process of being judged by Him for their sin.

First Reading:

Ezekiel 2:1-5 NAS95 1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with

you!" 2 As He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me. 3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. 4 I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' 5 As for them, whether they listen or not–for they are a rebellious house–they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Since Ezekiel was far removed from the temple his ministry duties as a priest would have been practically eliminated. However, God called Ezekiel to a new ministry as a prophet and empowered him through the sending of the Holy Spirit specially to him. The Spirit of God was the One that "set [him] on [his] feet" and only after this event did Ezekiel begin hearing God speak directly to him in contrast to the visions he recorded in the opening of the book. Now that Ezekiel was commissioned as God's prophet, the oracles began pouring out to him. First, God told him to whom he was sent: the "sons of Israel" (v. 3b). Next, as if Ezekiel didn't already know, God told him about the rebellious nature of the people. God used multiple harsh phrases to describe them including rebellious (3 times), transgressors, stubborn, obstinate, as well as implied that they would not listen (v. 5).

What can we learn from this commissioning passage from Ezekiel's life? While we may not be a prophet or a priest, we can see some principles about how God works and what our response to Him should be. First, when God calls a servant He empowers them through His Spirit. As church age believers we are guaranteed that the Holy Spirit lives within us (Ephesians 1:14) to empower us to do works of service that He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Second, we are to carry out God's commission regardless of the response of those who we are serving. We should not be complexly oblivious to receiving constructive feedback in how to improve in serving people. However, this passage is teaching that sometimes our service will go unappreciated. When that is the case God is calling us to remain faithful, regardless of the response.

I know of a missionary who worked in Germany for a dozen years without seeing even a single faith convert to the Lord. It would have been very easy to be discouraged and to evaluate his work as a failure. But in God's value system this man, like Ezekiel, was faithful even though there wasn't a lot on the outside to show for it. In Ezekiel's case, rabbinical tradition says that he was eventually killed by someone who resisted his message. Both of these examples serve to encourage us to persevere under adverse circumstance when we are trying to do God's will in our own lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. In this passage, Paul is explaining the importance of weakness for our spiritual growth.

Second Reading:

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NAS95 7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

When is weakness ever a good thing? In our culture the answer is never, but in God's economy it serves a valuable purpose. Paul, because of his unique position as one who had direct revelation from God, could have tried to do ministry in his own strength. Dependence upon God is our life source. Unfortunately, we can be deceived into thinking that we don't need God, even as a Christian. So God in His kindness and wisdom allowed the "thorn in the flesh" to come upon Paul. The "thorn in the flesh" is a messenger of Satan, which is obviously something bad, something we wouldn't want for ourselves. Even though Paul pleaded and thought that he would be more productive without it, God reassured him that this bad thing could be used for his own good. The good that God used it for was to break Paul's of the dangerous and self-destructive nature of self-reliance and instead develop a spirit of dependence upon God which was his lifeline.

Like Paul, we are often deluded into believing that real life is found in exerting our independence and power over our circumstances. Self-reliance though, does not lead us to eternal life. Instead, abiding in Christ and dependence upon God is where real life is found (John 15:1-5). These character qualities of abiding and dependence upon God do not come naturally to us. God, in His infinite wisdom, knows how to keep us close to Himself and He will use even bad circumstances, i.e. a thorn in the flesh, to carry out His purpose in our life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the next passage, we will see a fatal response to Jesus' display of supernatural power in his home town of Nazareth.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 6:1-6 NAS95 1 Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. 2 When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. 4 Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." 5 And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And He wondered at their unbelief. And He was going around the villages teaching.

In this vignette we see people discrediting Jesus' ministry because of their own short sightedness and resentment. In other passages, we see people being humbled by Jesus' display of power. Here the people of Jesus' hometown list the names of specific family members in an attempt to invalidate His miraculous signs. This would seemingly let them off the hook for being accountable to recognize the Messiah among them. The proper response to the Messiah would be to follow Him but they choose to disdain Him. As we saw in the first reading the people of Israel are a rebellious lot, obstinate, and refuse to listen even when miraculous signs are manifested in their presence. As a result of their great lack of faith Jesus' miraculous signs were withheld because God shows up when we exercise faith in Him (Hebrews 11:6).

This passage teaches us that there are two responses to Jesus' rightful claim as Messiah. One response is to believe and place our trust in Jesus even when it feels kind of awkward or it costs us dearly. The second response is to push away the overwhelming evidence by discrediting the messengers of the Gospel and His message. These people could see the signs because they were coming from Jesus who was to them just a regular human being. Instead of shifting their lives to be open to Jesus' claim of divinity and messiahship they rejected Him. We can learn from their fatal response.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the past I have struggled with some health issues that were chronic in nature and undiagnosed. The daily frustration and concern over this continues to cause me to live my life in a way much closer to God's kingdom than the world. Without this constant struggle I would not be as conscious of my need for the Lord and his daily sustenance. List one weakness with which you are suffering from which you have asked God to deliver you. Talk to Him in prayer about how He might be using this to develop your dependence upon Him.

2. During the Fourth of July holiday I frequently travel back to my hometown to celebrate. I encounter people who are aware of the spiritual transformation that happened in my life when I surrendered my life to Jesus. Sometimes they respond to me in a similar way as the people in Jesus' hometown who resented the fact that He was holy. How can the passages from this week's study encourage you to persist in your own holiness and personal service of the Lord even when others disparage or scoff at your spiritual development?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-27-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers, encouraging them to be generous with their suffering brothers and sisters in Christ. The Gospel lesson tells the story of Jesus healing two marginalized people: a little girl who died and a woman who suffered with bleeding for many years. In both passages, we see that the heart of God is tender toward those who are suffering.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the apocryphal book of Wisdom.

First Reading:

Wis 1:13-15; 2:23-24 God did not make death,

nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living.

For he fashioned all things that they might have being;

and the creatures of the world are wholesome,

and there is not a destructive drug among them

nor any domain of the netherworld on earth,

for justice is undying.

For God formed man to be imperishable;

the image of his own nature he made him.

But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world,

and they who belong to his company experience it.

Death was not God's original plan for the world, rather death came into existence through sin. We see that in Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned*" (Romans 5:12). When God first created the world, it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Sin came about when Adam willingly sinned against God by following the lead of his wife Eve who was misled by Satan (Genesis 3:6). One day this eternal, sinless perfect life will be restored upon earth when Jesus returns to rule and reign.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

On his third missionary journey, Saint Paul encouraged Gentile Christians to help their struggling brothers and sisters in Christ who were impacted by a severe famine in Jerusalem (see Acts 24:17). In this part of his letter to the believers in Corinth, he is urging them to excel at being financially generous and to complete their pledge of support to those who are in physical need. In the first part of this section, he commends them for leading the way in their faith and conduct. He then asks them to become leaders in the area of generosity. So it is not only important to want to give, but to follow through and actually sacrifice on behalf of others. He calls the act of giving a "gracious work" (v. 7). He then ties in this "gracious work" with the sacrifice that Christ made on our behalf, which is the motivating force behind the compassionate giving that should characterize Christians.

Second Reading:

(Verses 8, 10, and 11 which were omitted from the reading were included in order to provide the full context and meaning).

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 NAS95 7 "But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. 8 I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness

of others the sincerity of your love also. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. 10 I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. 11 But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. 12 For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 13 For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality– 14 at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; 15 as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."

Saint Paul points out a few key principles to encourage the Corinthian believers to follow through on their pledge to provide financial relief to the starving Christians in Jerusalem. Paul challenged the Corinthians to be generous in giving the things that God had so generously provided, saying that they "abound in everything" else (v. 7), so why would generosity not be part of their reputation as well? This calling to give was not a command but rather a challenge that Paul provided to reveal the true "sincerity of [their] love" (v. 8b). He is clear that this calling to gracious giving is his opinion, but from what we know about the other times that Paul has given his personal views it is a sound biblical principle if not an outright command.

Paul went on to explain how Jesus was the example of sacrificial giving by saying, "though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (v. 9b –ff). Paul's reasoning is twofold. One, if the Corinthians give during their times of prosperity they can count upon other Christians to give to them during their own time of need. The most basic decency of a human citizen of the world is in giving to others in need out of one's abundance. Second, sacrificial giving is evidence of their true calling to serve God. Although a seed must of course be initially planted, it doesn't go far without proper watering and continued nurturing. Paul admonished the Corinthians not to just begin the good work of giving, but to carry it to completion (v. 11). He closed with a quote from Exodus 16:18, a passage in which Moses explained how through God's sovereign control everyone gathered manna in the exact amount that they required. In the new economy of God after the Exodus God called the Hebrews and all people subsequent to them to act as His agent in distributing goods evenly from each person's excess to fill other people's needs.

What was happening back then historically can be a lesson to us in our own day and age. First, he calls them to recognize the connectedness of the universal church. He challenged them to step up to the plate and become an example for the other churches, who were already contributing generously to the cause of helping their brothers and sisters. Paul wrote to this group of believers in a previous

letter about the connectedness of the church by calling Christians the "body of Christ". In explaining how each believer is interdependent, he said, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). What happens to one believer (good or bad) impacts the rest of the body. This interconnectedness with the universal church should awaken our sensitivity to others around us; those we know and even those we do not know. Being others-oriented can release us from the tyranny of self-absorption, which is more oppressive than we often recognize. God's structure of connecting us to the larger body of Christ and giving us an awareness of others in need is a blessing to our spiritual growth and maturity.

The second main point that Paul makes about giving in this passage is that the motive behind the giving is more important than the actual amount of the gift. He emphasizes that generous giving can be an outward display of sincerity of heart and love for others. The supreme example of generous giving is Jesus Christ Himself. Though Christ had all of the privileges of heaven, He gave up His rightful place of authority and riches to submit Himself to the poverty of this world. One of the early hymns of the church focused on Christ's humility for our sake and reinforces the theme of why we should be generous to others. It is a way that we can show the world who Jesus is. The following Scripture helps us to understand this more.

Philippians 2:5-11 NAS95 5 "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The end result is that through Christ's lowering of Himself to our poverty level, He could bring us to a place of richness beyond what this world could offer. Being motivated by Christ's great sacrifice for us is a sign of really understanding the immensity of grace that has been given to us.

Another important and encouraging principle that Saint Paul gives in regard to giving is that God entrusts us with different amounts of financial means so that we might steward resources in a way that promotes equality and unity in the body of Christ. Some parts of our world have very little in regard to material resources. These ones who are not rich in the world's eyes are often rich in other resources, such as faith, relationships and having an eternal perspective. Paul says that their

richness can supply what a materially wealthy community of believers might not have. And a materially wealthy community can benefit those who are impoverished by giving sacrificially and providing a sense of unity among the believers (see also 1 Timothy 6:11-19). So while God could magically provide for all of the needs in the world, He does not override the will of believers, but instead, trusts us to live in the power of Christ so that we participate in this "gracious work". We have received grace and so we give graciously to others out of the abundance of what Christ has given to us. This passage encourages all believers to consider our part in being the hands and feet of Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Mark where we will see the story of a miraculous healing.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 5:21-43 NAS95 21 When Jesus had crossed over again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around Him; and so He stayed by the seashore. 22 One of the synagogue officials named Jairus came up, and on seeing Him, fell at His feet 23 and implored Him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death; please come and lay Your hands on her, so that she will get well and live." 24 And He went off with him; and a large crowd was following Him and pressing in on Him. 25 A woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, 26 and had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse– 27 after hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind Him and touched His cloak. 28 For she thought, "If I just touch His garments, I will get well." 29 Immediately the flow of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. 30 Immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power proceeding from Him had gone forth, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?" 31 And His disciples said to Him, "You see the crowd pressing in on You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'" 32 And He looked around to see the woman who had done this. 33 But the woman fearing and trembling, aware of what had happened to her, came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. 34 And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction." 35 While He was still speaking, they came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?" 36 But Jesus, overhearing what was being spoken, said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe." 37 And He allowed no one to accompany Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James. 38 They came to the house of the synagogue official; and He saw a commotion, and people loudly weeping

and wailing. 39 And entering in, He said to them, "Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep." 40 They began laughing at Him. But putting them all out, He took along the child's father and mother and His own companions, and entered the room where the child was. 41 Taking the child by the hand, He said to her, "Talitha kum!" (which translated means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). 42 Immediately the girl got up and began to walk, for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were completely astounded. 43 And He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this, and He said that something should be given her to eat.

This is a powerful story of Jesus' healing power and His compassion for marginalized people. The two females in this story ran parallel lives until the day that Jesus came to town. The day the little girl was born must have brought great joy to Jairus and his family twelve years earlier. Jairus was a religious man, obviously respected in the community, which is shown by his upfront request to have Jesus come to his home to heal his daughter. At the time when this little girl came into the world, the woman with the hemorrhage began her long journey on her desperate reach toward her last hope, Jesus. Twelve years was a long time to be struggling with a bleeding issue, which would have marginalized her in the ceremonial world of the Jews as "unclean" in everyday social settings. After twelve long years of seeking help in every possible form, it is understandable how desperate she would have been. She was so desperate that she was willing to go against the social taboo of being in a crowd of people even though she was "unclean" in order to reach out and touch Jesus' garment in hopes of being healed.

In the end, Jesus did heal her, but not without correcting her theology. While she placed all her hope in touching his garment, as if his clothes held some special force that could be invoked by her grasping reach, He helped her to see that it was her faith that so moved the heart of God to heal her. This is an important point for all of us to recognize. Faith is living as if something unseen and unrealized is actually at work. When your faith is put in God, it means to lean your full weight on Him, as if there is no other lifeline. The Bible describes it this way: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). It also says that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus thought that is was important for her to understand that she was healed by reaching out to the right Person, not because of her superstitious beliefs.

Now that the woman was healed and made clean, it was time for Jesus to turn his attention to the original request that brought Him on the journey to begin with, Jairus' daughter. She was sick when Jairus went to implore Jesus to come heal her. But in this delay, she died, and the report came to Jairus that all hope for healing was gone. Jesus, though, encouraged Jairus to have faith and believe that He could not only heal a sick daughter, but that He could also bring her back to life. The Gospel records other incidents where Jesus raised people back to life: the widow's son (Luke 7:13-15) and

Lazarus (John 11:43-44). These important accounts were recorded so that we could believe and have life that is truly life in Jesus. Saint John put it this way: "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

How does this story contribute to our understanding of Jesus and the role of humans as we seek to have relationship with Him? We learn that Jesus is God because He has power to heal and to raise the dead. While magicians and charlatans could conjure up evil powers to perform signs and wonders, no one but God has the authority to bring people back from the dead. It is clear from this account that the Gospel writer is making a case for Jesus' divinity and authority. Our response, then, is will we believe and surrender to His divinity and authority in our own lives? Will we come to Him as the One who said that He is the way, the truth and the LIFE (John 14:6)? Or will we try to find life on our own terms, pursuing a little bit of religion to satisfy our guilty conscience? Obviously, the Gospel writers went to great lengths to provide enough information about Jesus to convince us of His rightful place as King and Lord of our lives. May our search for His leadership in our lives be as desperate and as focused as that of Jairus and the woman with the bleeding issue.

As I type, I am reminded of a recent incident that has left me desperate for Jesus to be in control of my life and to experience His lordship over my knee-jerk reaction to defend myself. I was criticized for not doing part of my job well. At first I wanted to defend myself and prove my worth to others. But after taking a deep breath, I turned to Jesus and silently asked Him what He wanted me to learn in this situation. I still don't know what that is, but I trust that He will help me to let Him be Lord of my life so that I don't have to rely on my accomplishments or my self-defense to prop up my ego. Instead of taking matters into my own hands and trying to find life in my own sense of self-righteousness, I can rely on Him, leaning my full weight on His perfection. I can learn from people's criticism and solicit feedback so that I can learn and grow. We are all a work in progress!

Reflection Questions

1. How do you feel when you consider the great compassion that Jesus had for the two women who were in need? What needs do you have that you can talk to Him about today? How does knowing His compassion for you encourage your approach to Him?

2. In both passages, Jesus was highlighted as One who has ultimate power. In the New Testament lesson, He became poor to bring us to His heavenly riches and in the Gospel lesson, He was able to heal and raise the dead. When you look at your life and the obstacles that seem to get you down, how does knowing that Christ has ultimate power influence your walk of faith? Sometimes, we are discouraged because we do not see Him using His power to do what we think He should do on our behalf. But take a few moments and ask Him to help you to see where He wants to exercise His authority in your life. See if in this next week your heart might be willing to desperately seek out His lordship in your life as you come up against obstacles and discouragement.

3. The Bible says to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17) regardless of the circumstances. How hard do you think the woman in this story prayed for help? Since she had nowhere else to turn it's easy to imagine that she was very persistent in her calling upon God for help. Certainly, God allowed these dire circumstances in the woman's life in order to bring her to faith in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of her sins. Perhaps the woman was always faithful to pray, even before she became afflicted with the disease. Jairus, too, was a religious man, yet he lost his little daughter to a terrible illness. He knew where to turn when life got out of control. He desperately searched for Jesus, the Son of God and the rightful Lord of the universe. These two individuals are pictures of desperate hearts seeking God's help.

How bad do things have to get before we pray? Regardless of our circumstances**, God has called usnot to wait until troubles come our way, but to be faithful and pray in order to obey.** This includes praying not only about our needs but also for the needs of others.

What are some practical ways that we may improve our level of persistence in prayer? Here are some methods that have worked for me, although they may not be suitable for everyone.

A. Write your prayer requests down on a 3×5 card. Carry this with you and as you find time pray throughout the day. It's helpful to categorize your requests, such as "Healing" or "Come to Faith in Jesus."

B. A very easy way to remember to pray for a very short list of people is to assign each of them to one finger, I call these "finger prayers." If you want to go one step further, meet with one of them and when you pray with them the first time have them hold that particular finger and tell them that this will help you to pray for them.

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C. Consider the concept of constructing a kind of "prayer maze" in your head by assigning the people for whom you are praying to a geographical map of where they are located. For example, you could begin with praying for people in your home town, then move on to prayers for those located in the western part of your state, then to the north, east, and so on. This has proven very helpful to me since many times I pray for people during my daily exercise where I would not have access to cards on which I had listed prayer requests.

D. Finally, pray! Ask God to show you ways to improve your prayer life. In a previous edition of Mass Notes we discussed Luke 16:1-13. The application of this text was that God has called us to use our talents and ingenuity in order to lead people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Pray and ask God to energize your prayer life through the use of your time, talents, and materials possessions. This includes using our technological devices like smart phones and computers.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-20-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass study notes. This week the three readings may seem to be unrelated, but a closer study helps the Christian to get a much clearer picture of who God and Jesus are—above and separated from man, their creation—and the awesome power they possess and exercise on behalf of mankind. The theologians say that God is transcendent, that is, He is way above and beyond His creation. In fact, we could know nothing about God at all, if He had not chosen to reveal Himself to mankind—through creation, through His Word, and through His Son. Jesus came to make God known in a personal way by His presence as a man among men. Immanuel, the name given Him in Matthew 1:23, means "God with us."

In the first reading, Job, the ancient Old Testament believer, was visited by the awesome God, and was dumbstruck. When Jesus spoke to Saul from heaven (Acts 9:3), the church's chief persecutor fell to the ground in recognition of who Jesus was. Afterwards, in his New Testament writings, then known as Paul, the Apostle shares much about the purpose of Jesus' coming and how it affects those who come to faith in Christ. Finally, we see an aspect of Jesus' life revealed through the Gospel reading. Jesus certified that He was the promised Messiah through the demonstration of His miraculous power over the physical, natural, and spiritual constraints of life.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from what many consider to be the oldest book in the Bible. *Note: Verses 2 – 7 which were omitted in the original reading are included here in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading

Job 38:1-11 NAS95 1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, 2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me! 4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, 5 Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? 6 On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, 7 When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy? 8 Or who enclosed the sea with doors When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; 9 When I made a cloud its garment And thick darkness its swaddling band, 10 And I placed boundaries on it And set a bolt and doors, 11 And I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther; And here shall your proud waves stop'?

The story of Job is familiar to most Christians. He was a righteous man who honored God and served his fellow men by helping in their times of distress or need. Satan approached God and wanted to test Job, claiming that he was faithful to God only because he was richly blessed in material and physical ways. God allowed Satan to test Job and the patriarch suffered the loss of crops, possessions, and his children. It's difficult to imagine the pain and suffering of this saint, and what made it worse was the counsel he received from his so-called friends. They accused him of some failure or sin that brought God's judgment upon him. He remained true, however, claiming "I know that my redeemer lives," (Job 19:25).

In the midst of his suffering, Job lamented, "If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together" (Job 9:33). His plea is answered in the New Testament, where Paul wrote, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Little did Job understand that God's plan was to ultimately redeem lost mankind.

Today's reading presents the end of the Job's story. God appears to him and asks a series of rhetorical questions; which Job couldn't answer. Instead, he responds as anyone would in the presence of almighty God: "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more" (Job 40:4-5) and "*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes*" (Job 42:5-6).

What should we take away from this reading? In the presence of God, we mortals are sinful and undeserving. In contrast, God is the great Creator, the almighty God who is worthy of worship. The next reading will reveal God's plan to restore sinful man to Himself.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in the city of Corinth. *Note: Verses 18 – 21 which were omitted from the original reading are included here in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 5:14-21 NAS95 14 For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; 15 and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. 16 Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. 17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are

ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Paul emphasizes that Jesus died for lost mankind with the purpose that redeemed men would not live for themselves (which is the natural instinct of men) but would live for Christ. He is worthy of such commitment because He suffered humiliating death, paying the awful price for our sin, and rose from the dead as proof positive that God's demand had been paid fully.

The Apostle goes on to emphasize the significant transformation that occurs when a sinner confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior. It isn't that the convert has merely changed, but he is a new creature; he has been transformed. That's a word that describes the change that occurs when a chrysalis becomes a butterfly. Wow! It's a radical difference in nature. And because the believer has been changed, his whole life is changed. He no longer yearns for the things of his former, unconverted life. Rather, he finds everything is new, and his affections, motivations, and actions are now committed to Jesus.

What's more, the Christian now becomes an official representative of Christ on earth. Just as the sinner was reconciled to God by faith, he now is to be an ambassador for Christ, a minister of reconciliation to the lost world. God desires to use the Christian as His spokesman to share the good news of God's grace.

Paul concludes the paragraph with a startling statement about what it cost Jesus to become a satisfactory sacrifice for sin. It's hard to think of Jesus as becoming sin for us, but that's what the text says. Only by His accepting all our sin (He had none of His own) could that sin be washed away by the sacrifice of His life. As a result, by faith, we can "become the righteousness of God in Him." Praise God!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's Gospel reading is from Saint Mark. Jesus had been teaching the multitude, using parables—stories that illustrate truth. Everyone likes stories, and Jesus could teach deep, spiritual realities by using familiar scenes and events. He had spoken of the sower whose seed fell on various

kinds of soil with differing results. As he told His disciples, many hearers would not understand but He explained the teaching to them. On this occasion he used many parables and explained them to the Twelve (Mark 4:33).

Gospel Reading

Mark 4:35-41 NAS95 35 On that day, when evening came, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." 36 Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. 37 And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. 38 Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" 39 And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. 40 And He said to them, "Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?" 41 They became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

Jesus was no doubt tired from the day of teaching (after all He was human), He instructed the disciples to go with Him to the other side of the lake. As they sailed, Jesus went to the back of the boat and slept. A terrible storm arose, and the disciples, fearing for their lives, awoke Jesus. We don't know what they intended Him to do, but He rebuked them for their lack of faith. Then, He performed a powerful miracle, ordering the wind and the sea to be calm. Immediately, the storm died down and everything became completely calm. Who could imagine that anyone could stop a storm by merely speaking to it?

Wondering among themselves, the disciples asked each other, "Who is this?" "Even the wind and the sea obey Him." As in the reading from Job and 2 Corinthians, we are faced once again with the all-powerful God. Jesus was not only 100% human; He was 100% God. He did not give up His deity when He was born on this earth. Jesus performed miracles of healing, raising the dead, casting out demons, and ordering the weather—all of which were the proof that He, indeed, was the promised Messiah who was to come to redeem His people, giving signs of His authority by the miracles He performed. When we read the Gospels, we are not merely reading exciting stories, we are being introduced to the very Creator God who sent His Son to save us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How would you react if God were to appear to you as He did to Job? Would you be proud that He spoke to you or would you respond with reverent fear and repentance?