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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-27-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the Book of Nehemiah in which we learn about rebuilding of the people of God through their learning from the Word of God. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul in which we learn about spiritual gifts distributed among members of the church. Finally, we close with a reading from Luke in which we see Jesus quoting from the Prophet Isaiah in fulfillment of this Old Testament prophet's writings about Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Nehemiah that concerns itself with the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the people following their exile to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. During their 70 year exile from the land there was a change of world powers from Babylon to Medo/Persia under the reign of King Cyrus. The return to Jerusalem happened in three waves beginning with Zerubbabel as chronicled in Ezra chapters 1 – 6. The second wave was led by Ezra as described in Ezra 7 – 10. The third and final wave was led by Nehemiah as described in Nehemiah chapters 1 – 3. Nehemiah was concerned primarily with the rapid rebuilding of the wall of the city that he accomplished against the greatest of odds in just 52 days. We have to remember that in the ancient near east the city wall formed an extremely important physical barrier in the city but also an import cultural and psychological foundation. The city gate was where information was passed to the people, judgments were held, and various goods moved in and out of the city. This city gates were

the choke points through which every important thing passed into the city, whether food, information, or important (or not) people.

There are three topics to keep in mind while reading the chronicles of Nehemiah (and Ezra). First is the city of God, meaning Jerusalem. Second is the people of God, the Jews. Third is the Word of God. Today's reading is concerning that last topic, as the context of the reading is the restoration of the Scriptures to the people after the restoration of wall of Jerusalem. At this early stage of the restoration of the people to the city, the spiritual lives of the people were in shambles after an entire generation had passed since their captivity in Babylon. As the next generation prepared to resume their lives in the Promised Land, they found the homeland physically broken and spiritually void. Nehemiah, the man of God, after successfully directing the people in the rebuilding the city walls, gathered the people together to hear Ezra cast a vision for the spiritual rebuilding of the people (Nehemiah 7:5). Ezra was a priest who returned with Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 12:1).

First Reading:

> *Nehemiah 8:1-10 NAS95 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. 4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. 8 They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. 9 Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

After the rebuilding of the wall around the city of God, Nehemiah gathered the people of God to learn from the reading of the Word of God. During their seventy-year captivity, the reading of the Word was scarce. As Ezra began the reading of the Word, the people instinctively responded in unison by worshiping the LORD "with their faces to the ground" (v. 6). As the Levites (priests of

God) read the Word they also explained it to the people (v. 8). The people began weeping during the preaching of the Word of God (v. 9) to which the leaders responded by declaring the day as a celebration and one on which they were not to be grieved for "the joy of the LORD is [their] strength" (v. 10).

The people experienced conviction brought about by the Word of God as the priests and Levites explained it to them. This was a very good sign that after their long stay in Babylon that the Word still had this effect upon their hearts. The Book of Ecclesiastes tell us that there is time for everything, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven– A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted" and on it goes (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). There was indeed a time for mourning as God convicted the people of their sin, and it was a good sign that this indeed happened during the reading and explanation of the Word. However, as the day progressed the leaders realized that the time for mourning had ended and instead called the people to celebrate the victory that God had given them.

In the introduction, we mentioned how there were three themes in the Ezra / Nehemiah chronicles including the City of God, the people of God, and the Word of God. As Christians, our identity isn't tied to the City of God (Jerusalem) as was (and is) the Jews. Instead, our identity as the people of God is closely tied to our relationship with the incarnate Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus told us that He went aware to "prepare a place for us" (John 14:3). The Book of Revelation describes this place as the New Jerusalem, a heavenly city built by God that will one day descend from heaven and be presented to the people of God. John said, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). This eternal city, with gates that will never be destroyed is what Jesus is preparing for us now. At the closing of the age of the people of God will inherit the City of God prepared by the Word of God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul opened this chapter with a clear explanation of his purpose by saying, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware" (1 Corinthians 12:1). First Paul explained there the variety of spiritual gifts that God distributed among the people, next he moved in today's reading to explain their **purpose**.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 12:12-31 NAS95 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an*

> *eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

The big idea in the reading is that God distributes spiritual gifts among the members of the church, the body of Christ, in diverse ways in order to accomplish His purposes. Each of members of the church are to use their diverse gifts for the building up of the church, the body of Christ. Christians are not to boast about their particular gifts but rather are to cooperate with each other in the body of Christ much in the way that the parts of the body work together. Since each person's abilities are gifts given by God, they are not to boast about the gift that was given to them as if it were somehow superior to the gifting of another church member. For example, the gift of helps is in no way inferior to someone having the gift of hospitality.

The second concept in the reading beginning in verse 28 is the organization of the church by God in order to take maximum advantage of the "gift mix" in the church. God has ordained specific gifts within the organization of the local church such a way as to make the church most effective. When Paul describes the gift of tongues in the church this was most likely what we call a "sign gift" operational in the early church in which certain people were given divine, prophetic utterance which could only be understood by someone with the corresponding gift of interpretation. "Prophecy" in the early church included both foretelling (telling the future) as well as forth telling (exclaiming existing prophecy or Scripture), although the former seems to have gradually ceased in the ages since the beginning of the church age. Some possibly had both the gift of tongues and of interpretation. Additionally, we know that during Pentecost in Acts 2:6 we know that when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the first group of church members they spoke in tongues that the surrounding people heard in their own languages. Regardless of the nature of the gift being described by Paul here in First Corinthians, the gift was one that enriched the churched and helped it to accomplish God's specific purposes in the particular era. It's should not be surprising to us to find giving modern believers different gift mixes in order to accomplish His purposes in our era.

A proper understanding of today's reading is paramount to a proper functioning church today. Although God distributes spiritual gifts as He sees fit, each person is to utilize their gifts to the maximum advantage **of the church**. They are not to boast about the superiority of their gift either vocally or in their hearts as to think of themselves as superior. As Paul closed the reading in verse 31 he mentioned "*And I show you a still more excellent way*" just before he launches into his teaching of the superiority of love over all of the gifts. He said, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). If we maintain the bond of love at the center of having hearts of service for the Lord, we will automatically use our spiritual gifts for the maximum advantage of the church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the Book of Luke. It opens with a statement of Luke's purpose and then moves to chapter four in which we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue in His home village of Nazareth north of Jerusalem not far from the Sea of Galilee.

When Isaiah wrote his Book, all of the events concerning Jesus were yet future. Yet in this section in Saint Luke Jesus quoted from Isaiah and said that a portion of it was being fulfilled at that very instant. However, Jesus stopped his quote exactly at that point at which the prophetic timetable turned to events concerning His Second Coming.

The context of the reading today from Luke Chapter 4 is that Jesus is just beginning His ministry and He had returned to His home town of Nazareth. This reading is just after Jesus' baptism. Read the text from Saint Luke and carefully note Jesus' quotation from Isaiah that is marked in all CAPITAL LETTERS.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 1:1-4 NAS95 1 In as much as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.*
>
> *Luke 4:15-21 NAS95 15 And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. 16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, gave it back to*

> *the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

In this section of Luke, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1-2a but stopped short of the concluding portion of Isaiah 61:2. Verse two, with the section highlighted that Jesus omitted from Isaiah, said "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, **And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn**." Jesus said in verse 21b of Luke 4, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v.21b). It's very significant that Jesus stopped where he did when he was quoting from Isaiah because it is important to understand the distinction between the purpose of His First Coming and of His second coming. We live in the "pause" between the First and Second Coming of Christ. This era allows us time to choose to embrace the favor of the Lord (grace) through faith. The next era, though, will usher in the day of "vengeance of our God." Who can stand in the midst of Him setting the record straight? None of us has a chance outside of God's wonderful provision through the death of His Son, Jesus at His first coming. Understanding this distinction will make it possible to properly understand the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. It also helps to interpret the future events in the Book of Revelation including the purpose of the Great Tribulation period that we discussed in a previous issue.

What's the importance of the Gospel reading for your life as a believer in Jesus Christ? First, we can trust the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus' First Coming because we can read about the facts of their fulfillment in the New Testament. Second, since we can trust the prophecies about Jesus' First Advent we can trust those about His Second Coming. Jesus' Second coming is when the believing world will realize the wonderful promises from God including restoration of the world to its pre-fallen, sinless condition. The Prophet Isaiah said, "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We have hope that Jesus' Millennial Kingdom will be a world of universal peace. This promise should motivate us to reach out to those in our community who don't know Jesus Christ personally.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Paul provided a list of spiritual gifts distributed among the body of Christ. Read the following two verses from the reading.

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

Do you find any of the unique abilities that God has given you listed among this list? In what ways do you serve the body of Christ with your gift? If your spiritual gift is not on the list, what is it? In what ways do you serve the church (meaning all believers, not just the local church) through the use of

your gift?

2. In what ways do you feel yourself inclined to see your spiritual gifts as superior to the gifts of another person? How does having a proper understanding of the reading from Corinthians help you to reevaluate this belief?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-20-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with an Old Testament reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, speaking about the future restoration of Israel. Then we move to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. In this portion he writes about the variety of spiritual gifts that God has given the people of the church. We conclude with a reading from the fourth Gospel, John, and the story of Jesus' first recorded miracle, turning water to wine. These passages should give the Christian great confidence in the blessed provision that God has made for those who trust and follow Him.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The prophet Isaiah lived and ministered for 40 years in the last half of the eighth century BC. In that day Israel was rampant with sin, and she pretty much ignored God's Word. Interspersed with the prophet's preaching against sin and declaring God's holiness and justice is an emphasis on the salvation God offers His people. In fact, the word salvation appears in Isaiah more than any other book of the Bible except the Psalms. Thus, he writes and speaks of the love of God and the salvation to come with Messiah. It is of special note, perhaps, that Isaiah's name means "the salvation of Jehovah." As you read the assigned passage, note the expression "the mouth of the LORD" which appears throughout the book but is unique to Isaiah.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 62:1-5 NAS95 1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, And for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, Until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, And her salvation like a torch that is burning. 2 The nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name Which the mouth of the LORD will designate. 3 You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, And a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 4 It will no longer be said to you, "Forsaken," Nor to your land will it any longer be said, "Desolate"; But you will be called, "My delight is in her," And your land, "Married"; For the LORD delights in you, And to Him your land will be married. 5 For as a young man marries a virgin, So your sons will marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So your God will rejoice over you.*

The subject of chapter 62 of Isaiah is the restoration of Israel. In spite of her sinfulness and disobedience, God has a wonderful plan for His people, and Isaiah writes these words of encouragement. Zion is another name for Israel's capital, Jerusalem, the city of David. When she is restored, her righteousness and salvation will be a bright light ("a torch that is burning") so that all the nations of the world will recognize her as God's holy people. Israel will be seen as "a crown of beauty" and "a royal diadem" in God's hand.

Israel will have a new name; "Forsaken" and "Desolate" will be replaced by "My delight is in her" and "Married." It might put us in mind of the New Testament teaching regarding the Church as the Bride of Christ. Later in the chapter (verse 12), Israel is described as "The Holy People," "The Redeemed of the LORD," and "Sought Out." God's chosen people will have a universal reputation and other nations will seek her out, recognizing her unique relationship with God.

Verse 5 uses poetic imagery to illustrate that the inhabitants of Jerusalem will delight in their dwelling place. The picture, as one writer has said, "leaves an overwhelming impression of joy delight, righteousness, beauty, safety, and peace." Moreover, God is said to "rejoice over you," like a groom delights in his bride. God's wonderful plan of redemption not only delivers His people from sin and depravity but, more than that, restores them to a place of righteousness, exalting them above all other nations, and making them a blessing to the nations.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians deals with a number of problems, disagreements, and even divisions in the church body. Paul writes to answer questions, to correct misunderstandings, and to give clear instructions. Chapters 12-14 deal with spiritual gifts, a topic of great importance, because these gifts are given by God to His people for the express purpose of enabling them to do His work in building up the church and evangelizing a lost world. Chapter 12's emphasis is on the giving of the gifts and what they are essentially. Paul begins the chapter by pointing out that no one is a true Christian (one who says, "Jesus is Lord") unless the Holy Spirit has done His miraculous work of grace in bringing him to faith. Then the writer launches his significant teaching regarding spiritual gifts.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 12:4-11 NAS95 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.*

First, note that while Paul acknowledges the variety of God's endowments, he uses significantly different terms to describe them: "gifts," "ministries," effects." He also attributes the giving of these endowments to the Trinity: "the same Spirit," the same Lord," and "the same God." It is abundantly clear that whatever the gifts are and however they are to be used, they are the gifts of an almighty, all-knowing God who does all things right. We must understand how Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, uses these terms.

"Gifts" given by the Spirit, v. 4, suggests abilities, equipping, endowments, an actual skill or capability to do something. "Ministries" given by the Lord, v. 5, have to do with opportunities, appointments, assignments, the particular tasks that the gifted one is to pursue. "Effects" given by God, v. 6, represent the work, the results, or accomplishments. Several important conclusions should be noted right away. First, spiritual gifts are not self-created; they are given by God. Second, the place or task given the individual Christian is not of his own choosing; it is assigned in God's wisdom. Third, the results are because of God's working through the gifted believer; He is the one "who works all things in all persons."

One of the most important factors to understand regarding gifts is that they are not given primarily for the benefit of the gifted person. Paul makes it clear that they are given "for the common good," v. 8. The gifted Christian, then, has no basis for pride in his gift. It isn't for his own gain (although he undoubtedly does benefit when he obediently exercises his gift as God directs him); it is for the spiritual growth of the body of Christ, the church.

Paul lists a number of spiritual gifts in this passage, but the list is neither restricted nor exhaustive. There are other passages that mention gifts (e.g. Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11), and it is likely that the sum of them all is only representative of the enabling, opportunities, and results that God alone can give. It is important to remember that it is all of God, both to the distribution of the gifts and their results. It is the "one and the same Spirit [who] works all these things."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

John's Gospel is different from the other three, often called "the synoptic Gospels," meaning that they are written from a similar viewpoint. John's is unique; for example, he doesn't include anything about the birth, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, or the ascension of Jesus. He includes only ten miracles (while the others have 18-20) and one parable (the others have from 5-20). But there are many important issues that only John includes. His purpose is expressed in chapter 20, verse 31: *These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

Gospel Reading:

> *John 2:1-11 NAS95 1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; 2 and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus *said to Him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." 6 Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. 8 And He said to them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it to him. 9 When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, 10 and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." 11 This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.*

We don't know who the bride and groom were at this wedding, but John tells us about some of the noted guests: Jesus, His disciples, and most notably, "the mother of Jesus." The story is familiar to most Bible readers: they ran out of wine at the wedding reception. Mary reports the need to Jesus as if to ask Him to do something about it. What was she really asking of Him? After all, she knew who He really was and had pondered the events of His life (Luke 2:38, 51). She had seen His remarkable demonstration in the Jerusalem Temple with the scholars (Luke 2:51). She no doubt longed to be relieved of the stigma attached to His birth (cf. John 8:41). And she probably thought that this occasion would be an ideal opportunity for Him to declare His origin and identity. Jesus' answer sounds rather harsh to us, but what he said to her probably was intended to inform her that what He would do would not achieve what she had in mind. It wasn't yet time for a full disclosure of His purposes.

Nonetheless, Jesus did perform the first of His public miracles, and the headwaiter was amazed at the better quality of this new wine compared to what had been served earlier. When Jesus exercises His power, it always produces the very best results! Verse 11 indicates that this miracle clearly demonstrated His glory and, as a result, His disciples "believed Him." The wonders that Jesus performed from this point on confirmed to His followers that He was more than a mere mortal. He was God in the flesh, as John clearly taught in chapter 1. The writer makes a most significant statement when he identifies this miracle as the "beginning of His signs." John includes seven signs in his Gospel, which are performed as verification of His identity as Messiah, the promised anointed one.

Reflection Questions

1. List two ways in which you are anticipating with joyful expectation the fulfillment of God's promise to restore His people?
2. List two or three of the special gifts God has given you. In what ways are you using it to serve God's church?
3. Discuss your understanding of how Jesus is the living "Word of God." How is a living person also the "word"?

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This week we will again look at Isaiah and a prophecy concerning Jesus. Then we will move onto a study of Jesus' baptism and discuss Jesus' nature as both God and Man along with his radical obedience to the Father's plan for His life. **Because of the concepts covered in the readings we are going to change the order of the analysis such that we cover the first reading, Gospel reading, and finally the second reading in that order.**

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 42, the alternate is from chapter 40 and won't be covered today. This is the first of what is known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs." This first song continues past the end of today's reading in verse 7 onward to verse 10. The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long awaited Messiah. The overall preceding context is the preparation of Judah's return from captivity at Babylon, something we know happened during the times of Nehemiah. As you read, take careful note of the characteristic of the Servant.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 42:1-7 NAS95 1 "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 "He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. 3 "A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 "He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." 5 Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it And spirit to those who walk in it, 6 "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a*

> *covenant to the people, As a light to the nations, 7 To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon And those who dwell in darkness from the prison.*

Isaiah said in verse six that God's Servant would be a light to the nations, which means to the Gentiles. Last week we discussed the revealing of this marvelous mystery, that the Messiah would bring salvation not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. Here God reaffirms that message, and stated that the Messiah would be appointed "as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations (Gentiles), To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon, And those who dwell in darkness from the prison" (vv. 6e-7). God compared the spiritual darkness of the Gentiles with blind people (7a), and with those in prison living in darkness (v. 7b-ff). Note that the only person in that society that would have had the authority to free an entire people group from prison was the King. Also, remember that in those days the prisons were gruesome dark places. Isaiah said that the future Servant, whom we know as Jesus, would act with kingly authority to free the prisoners from darkness. Saint Paul confirms this by saying, "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col 1:13).

You may wonder what Isaiah meant in verse 3 when he said, "A bruised reed He will not break, And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish." A lack of social justice was one of the primary themes of Isaiah, with widows and orphans especially oppressed (Isaiah 1:17). The reed referred to the weak people in the world, those wounded souls that truly need and seek the Messiah to save them. The "dimly burning wick" was symbolic of something which would have to be nurtured to keep going, a tiny flame which required kindling in order to make enough of a fire for a person to use. The Messiah won't stamp out the flame, He will enliven it! In fact, Jesus quoted the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) version of this text to prove that His coming was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus said, "A BATTERED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK OFF, AND A SMOLDERING WICK HE WILL NOT PUT OUT, UNTIL HE LEADS JUSTICE TO VICTORY" (Matthew 12:20).

What does this Servant Song mean for us today? First we can be sure that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy and came as the servant Messiah. The delight of the Father was on Him and the Spirit of the Lord was in Him. This same Messiah, the Righteous One, is the One in whom we put our trust to bring us salvation. He is worthy of our worship, our faith and our surrender. Second, as we surrender, we can trust that He will not take advantage of our weakened condition. In fact, on the contrary, He will nurture us and bring us to a place of fuller relationship with the Father. He will enliven what little faith we have as we open our hearts up to Him to do His good work in us. Lastly, the message of salvation is not just a theoretical freedom from the strangle-hold of sin, but an experiential reality that Jesus wants us to grow up into. He has set us free from the tyranny of sin and we no longer need to live in the dark prison that Satan had us in. Unfortunately, many of us do not know of this freedom and continue to live in the dungeon of guilt, worry and fear. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the second reading and the Gospel message, I would like to share some background of the key figures in Church history to provide you with a better understanding of the occasion of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. One of my hobbies has been the study of Church history and especially some of the main characters who played a role in shaping the doctrines held by Christian believers in what would be future times for them. In some cases, these characters postulated theological theories that, with adequate biblical support, became accepted by the early Church. Yet others proposed heretical ideas that during the process of being opposed by the Church led to the unexpected result of calcifying the *true* beliefs of the Church. In essence what happened was that when theological incorrect ideas came along, the church was forced to examine their presuppositions and beliefs more closely in order to state more clearly what they believed. For example, Marcion of Sinope, who was the son of an early bishop and in the early Second Century, proposed an early and incorrect canon of the Bible that ultimately led to the Church responding with one which was accepted by the early Church leaders. Another in this latter category was Nestorius Archbishop of Constantinople who, although later denied the teaching for which he was accused, proposed that the human Jesus and the divine Christ were two different persons. He was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. This brings us to a fellow named Eutyches whose teachings are important for us in understanding the Gospel message for today.

Eutyches was a presbyter at Constantinople and opposed Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus. He founded the teaching known as Monophysitism which said that Jesus had only one nature, rather than maintaining His divine nature and adding a human nature after his birth through Blessed Mary (Luke 1:48). Eutyches said that Jesus' human and divine natures were combined into the single nature of Christ "without any alteration, absorption or confusion: that of the incarnate Word." While some may maintain that this is theological hair splitting similar to asking "How many angels can fit on the head of a pin" it is extremely important that we understand the nature of Jesus. If Jesus wasn't fully man then how could he have fulfilled the Law. He also wouldn't have understood what it was like to live in our fallen world. If Jesus wasn't fully divine He couldn't have atoned for the sin of the entire world. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish them, but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). And the author of Hebrews said, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Somehow, Jesus was both fully man and fully God. The response of the Church to Eutyches was to formulate doctrine along the lines that Jesus was a unified whole being Who consisted fully of both human and divine nature without defining some magical quotient of the degree of mixing of the two. Jesus was 100% human and 100% divine! To say anything less would be a violation of the clear teaching of Scripture.

Jesus emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes during His earthly ministry. We see this in Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

> *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 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)*

Let's step back and summarize since we are juggling a lot of balls in the study today. We spoke about Isaiah's prophecy that Jesus would be God's Righteous Servant, acting as light to Gentiles and all people, and One whom would free the poor and oppressed people from spiritual darkness. In our overview of some important historical figures of Church history, we discussed the controversy over the nature of Jesus brought about by Eutyches, which led the Church to formulate theology about Jesus' nature consisting of both human and divine as a unified whole Being without a formula to the degree of mixing between the two natures. As we move to the Gospel reading we will see that since Jesus was 100% human (and 100% divine, how can that be?), as God's Righteous Servant He would have to submit Himself to the full measure of the Law. This meant living in submission to the plan of salvation predicated by His Father, which included the program of John the Baptist as the forerunner in the spirit of Elijah. As we will see, Jesus submitted to John's baptism of repentance to demonstrate his full compliance with the divine plan of the Father.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 3:15-22 NAS95 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. 19 But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, 20 Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison. 21 Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."*

Jesus had to fulfill all righteousness, and part of this was to submit to John's baptism of repentance. The Jews of that era were used to *repeated* ceremonial washings. However, John's baptism represented a person's *one-time* public confession of repentance, a willingness to turn from their sin and to the plan of God for their lives. Even though Jesus was sinless in His essence as God, He had to live a perfect, sinless life as a man, and this meant submitting to the Father's will through the ministry of John the Baptist. Otherwise, when King Herod came to kill all of the infants, as we saw last week, Jesus' death would have atoned for the sin of the world and that would have been the end of His ministry. "But God" had other ideas, and Jesus submitted to the Father's wishes. "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). We can celebrate that Jesus was willing to submit to the Father's plan.

As we make the sign of the cross, we can remember Jesus' baptism and how it demonstrated the reality of the Holy Trinity. We saw during the baptism that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus the Son like a dove (v.16e), and the Father announced, " This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-

pleased (v.17b). God said through Isaiah in the first reading, "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him" (Isaiah 42:1). God is delighted in His Righteous Servant, and He delights in us as servants of the Lord Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading is from Acts 10, the alternate reading from Titus 2 won't be covered. As we finish with the second reading, take note of what we said earlier about Isaiah's prophecy regarding freedom for the Gentiles living in darkness, as well as how Jesus was obedient to God as a Servant, even submitting to baptism by John the Baptist.

Second Reading:

> *Acts 10:34-38 NAS95 34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.*

Peter said that God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus was available to everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike. He said that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power (38b). Read verse one from the first reading in Isaiah again. "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1). Do you see how precisely the prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus? This is the One in whom we trust.

Reflection Questions

1. When Jesus went to John to be baptized, he made a public statement about his willingness to submit to the Father's plan through whatever form it would take. Though the Scriptures didn't seem to foretell the event of Jesus' baptism, there was plenty of prophecy regarding the obedient nature that God's Servant Messiah would take. Reflect upon the following verses from Isaiah regarding our Suffering Servant the Lord Jesus.

> *1 Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. 3 He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and*

> *we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living, For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? 9 His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. 10 But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:1-11)*

How does understanding the radical obedience of Jesus empower you to answer the calling that God has placed upon your life?

2. In what ways have you made a public profession of your faith? As the New Year dawns, what is at least one way in which you could accomplish this during the upcoming year?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-06-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes**.** The gift-giving season of Christmas has just passed from our radar screens. However, the tradition of gift giving is found in each of the readings of the mass this week. In the Old Testament reading, we see that people will give gifts to Jesus, the King, who will reign on earth during His second advent. The New Testament reading shows us how St. Paul was God's gift to the Gentiles. In addition, the Gospel reading recounts the story of the Wise Men who came from the East to give gifts to Jesus during His first advent.

Introduction to the Second Reading: (Not Normal Order This Week)

This week we are first going to examine the second reading from Saint Paul because the first reading from Isaiah and Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew must be studied together in light of the insights from Paul. The second reading is Ephesians Chapter Three where Paul unveiled a mystery that had been hidden throughout the ages until after Jesus' First Advent, what we just celebrated at Christmas. As you read this section of Ephesians (without all of the skipped verses) try to select the single verse that Saint Paul provided which summarized this mystery.

Second Reading:

> *1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles– 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel, (Ephesians 3:1-6)*

Even though Saint Paul did minister to the Jews (see for example Acts 13:14) his *primary* ministry was to the Gentiles. In contrast, Peter's main ministry was to the Jews. Paul, through the providence of the Holy Spirit, said that God placed him into the position of stewardship over the Gentile believers in the Church (verses 1 – 2). He said elsewhere in Galatians, "But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7). God determined that the *primary* focus of his ministry was to give the Gospel to the Gentiles, the same way that He sent Saint Peter to bring the message to the Jews. Though God set Paul apart to concentrate his ministry on the Gentile people, his background was that of a devout Jew (Philippians 3:5) and his heart was set upon winning the Jews to the Kingdom of God.

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted (Romans 11:17) into the people of God through the Church. It is important to understand, at least from a high level, Paul's background while we discuss this mystery which was revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who from all accounts would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strictly Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The quotation above from Isaiah brings us to the first reading, found in Chapter 60. As we said before, with the benefit of history and hindsight we understand that this section of Isaiah refers to the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, namely when He returns in glory. With this context in mind, study the reading and take special note of the gifts that the Gentile believers will bring to the LORD.

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First Reading:

> *1 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth, And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you, And His glory will appear upon you. 3 And nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)*

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v.2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v.3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for November 2, 2013. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

Note the types of gifts that the future Gentile leaders will bring to King Jesus. "They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6d). Throughout history, gold has been the most valuable of all metals. It's a rare and valuable treasure, and the perfect commodity that never degrades – making it an excellent gift to bring to Jesus, who is reigning as LORD. Frankincense is something very familiar to any Catholic, as this material produces a most pleasant aroma when burned and has the smell of perfume in its native form. I was an altar boy for most of my younger years and was frequently in close proximity to the priest burning this sweet swelling material. The burning of incense is symbolic of the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven (Revelation 5:8). The future world leaders will present their gifts of gold and incense directly to the Source of their salvation, the Lord Himself! What a joyous occasion this will be!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This brings us to the Gospel lesson from Matthew Chapter Two in which we find the Magi presenting their gifts to the King of the Universe. Read the text and take particular note of their **three** gifts.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." 3 And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." 9 And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. 10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)*

The context of this section is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, probably less than two years old as we see from Herod who later in Matthew made a plan to kill all infants two years old or younger. The Magi were likely people from the Babylonian region along the Euphrates River in present day Iraq south of Baghdad. These mysterious scholars were highly educated people that were part pagan priest, part magician, and part scribe. They were also interested in astrology and this was woven into their mystical religious beliefs. Nowhere in the text does it say that there were three of them, as in the famous song about the three wise men. This designation comes from the three gifts they brought with them to present to the King. There were likely a small group of them but they would have been accompanied by a large number of guards and servants. Thus this would have made their arrival that much more disturbing to King Herod.

The Jewish priests and scribes told the Magi the prophecy from the Prophet Micah, which they evidently weren't aware of, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This must be the case or they would have gone directly to Bethlehem in the first place and avoided King Herod. Verse 9 said, "And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they **had seen** in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was" (emphasis added). Then, the star reappeared! So, what did they do? Did they stop and ask for further directions? No, followed it and went to Bethlehem! Now they had both the prophetic prophesy from the Jews, and the star to guide them. Therefore, they kept going on the journey, but had to BELIEVE God's revelation and follow it.

Finally, when they arrived in Bethlehem and located Jesus, they presented their *three* gifts to him. The Magi's gift of gold would have been very useful to the holy family during their subsequent flight to Egypt necessary to flee King Herod. Notice the similarity of their gifts mentioned in the first reading from Isaiah 60 but with one glaring addition: myrrh. Myrrh was something used throughout the eastern world as an embalming agent. These kings of the east presented Mary and Joseph with a precious gift that could be used for the future burial of their Son. Look at it this way. One day you attended the baptism of an infant in the church, and afterwards one of the guests presented the happy couple with a beautiful new coffin for the child. Yes, the coffin could be sold and the money used to raise the child, but what kind of a message would the presentation of such a gift make to the parents? The magi, unbeknownst to themselves, predicted the death of the Messiah. Little did they know that His death was a necessary part of the redemptive story so that you and I might have eternal life. In a future age Gentile believers will present gifts of gold and incense to Jesus, the need for myrrh has been done away with because Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death for you and me.

The chain of ideas that emerged from the text is as follows. First, God gives revelation in order to find Jesus. Second, God calls us to believe his revelation and follow it. Finally, when we truly meet with God our response is joy, worship and giving! The bottom line is this. God calls us to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus and when we do our response is joy, worship and giving.

Reflection Questions

1. Think about the message that you send implicitly when you send someone a gift. A child gives his father a pair of gloves for Christmas. Another child gives his mother a box of candy. In light of the New Year and the idea of making resolutions for the next twelve months, what single gift could you present to Jesus this year?
2. It is easy to criticize the Pharisees for judging the Gentiles and for considering them "unworthy" of being saved. The definition of grace is that no one is worthy of it. It is God's unmerited favor. Think about your own attitude towards those who seem unlikely to become Christians. Is there someone who you can identify as unlikely to be a fellow heir, a fellow member of the body and a fellow partaker in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel? Commit to pray for this person and look for ways to be like St. Paul by loving them and speaking the truth of the Gospel to them.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-30-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at readings from First Samuel, then Colossians, and finally the Gospel reading from Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The optional first reading is from the Apocrypha and won't be covered in Mass Notes today. The first reading is from the Book of 1 Samuel. In our day, gender reveal parties have become a popular way for expecting couples to reveal the gender of their baby to family and friends. It is a fun excuse for a party but the truth is, in our society, most people are thrilled and thankful no matter what the outcome of the medical test showing the gender of the expected baby.

In Old Testament times, If the medical technology had been available, perhaps a gender reveal party would have made more sense because of the great importance among the Hebrew people to have children. Barrenness was seen as a curse and children as a blessing from the Lord. It was an even greater blessing to have a boy because the family name, inheritance, and headship were passed down through the son.

Elkanah, a man who lived during the time of the Old Testament judges, had two wives—Peninnah and Hannah. There was a rivalry between the two, and Peninnah, who had several sons and daughters, would regularly provoke Hannah because she was barren. This caused Hannah great sorrow.

Yearly, Elkanah would go up to the temple in Shiloh to worship the Lord there. On one of these trips, Hannah poured out her sorrow in the form of a prayer and vow to God. She promised that if God would give her a son, she would in turn give him back to the Lord to serve Him all the days of his life. God heard her prayer and gave her a son whom she named Samuel.

In today's reading, we see Hannah fulfilling her vow to God. How hard it must have been for her to relinquish her only son to the Lord. Once the child was weaned, she took him to Eli, the priest at Shiloh, and presented him for service to God. What a great demonstration of faith this was. Sometime later, but while Samuel was still a young boy, God called him to be a prophet in Israel and used him in a powerful way to reveal God's direction and will to God's people. Samuel faithfully spoke the word of the Lord concerning Israel all the days of his life. At God's direction, he anointed David to rule as king over Israel. Eventually another king would come from the house and line of David who would save His people from their sins and reign in righteousness. This king is Jesus.

First Reading:

> *1 Samuel 1:20-28 NAS95 20 It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD." 21 Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. 22 But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever." 23 Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. 24 Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. 25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. 26 She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. 27 "For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. 28 "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.*

Like Samuel, our children are a gift from God. We don't have to turn them over to full-time service in the church in order to dedicate them to Him. Teach them to serve God whole-heartedly no matter what profession they choose, knowing that God can do much with a man or woman whose heart is fully devoted to Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading

In many of the Apostle Paul's letters, he presents a tragic picture of us in our sinful, fallen state and contrasts us with Christ in his holiness and perfection. In addition, he recounts what God has done for us in His grace, when we deserved only wrath. Once we understand the depth of our sin and the riches of His grace toward us, only then does he ask us to live a life that properly honors God and reflects His glory.

In the book of Colossians, St. Paul tells us that we were enemies of God, alienated from Him and living in spiritual and moral darkness (Col.1:13,21). Jesus on the other hand, is the perfect image of the invisible God and supreme over all creation (1: 15-18). By His death He rescued us from the dominion of darkness and reconciled us to God, presenting us free from blemish and accusation (1:13, 22). Because of this, St. Paul says we are to live a life displaying His virtues and being thankful.

Second Reading:

> *Colossians 3:12-21 NAS95 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.*

To display these virtues, we must cooperate with God's work of transformation. If you read all of Ch. 3, you will notice how this passage is interspersed with action verbs that indicate there is something God wants us to do. Col. 3: 2 tells us to *set* our mind on things above—that is, to think about what we possess in the spiritual realm—salvation from our sin, peace with God, and eternal life, to name a few. Verse 5 tells us to *consider* ourselves dead to evil desires. Verse 9 tells us we are to *put aside* the old self and *put on* the new self. That means to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with our old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of our new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit.

In the Second Reading, we are told to *put on* the virtues of compassion, forgiveness, peace, and love. We are to *let* the Word of Christ dwell in our hearts, living its wisdom and teaching its precepts to others. Wives are to *submit* to husbands, husbands are to *love t*heir wives, and children are to *obey* parents. God is transforming us into Christ's likeness and calling us to intentionally live out those virtues for the benefit of others and the glory of God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is from the second chapter of Luke. The first 20 verses of this are some of the most well-known of the New Testament. This is the story of Jesus' birth in a humble stable and the angels' glorious announcement to the shepherds that a Savior has been born.

This Savior was God the Son who took on human flesh and was born as a baby—fully God and fully

man. And just like other human babies, Jesus grew from an infant to a boy to a man, increasing in physical stature but also in wisdom and favor with God and men (Luke 2:40,52). While much of his growth was typical, Jesus also developed in ways that astounded those around Him. Today's reading recounts an occasion when Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, amazed the seasoned teachers in the temple with the depth of His understanding of the things of God.

The background is as follows. Jesus had come to Jerusalem in a caravan with his parents to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. A day into the return trip, Mary and Joseph discovered their son was not with them. They quickly returned to Jerusalem, and after an anxious three-day search, found Jesus in the temple, interacting with the Jewish teachers.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 2:41-52 NAS95 41 Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; 43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, 44 but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him. 46 Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. 48 When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." 49 And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. 51 And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*

Mothers everywhere can identify with Mary's response to Jesus upon locating Him, which was likely a mixture of relief and consternation: *"Why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you."* Jesus' response must have sounded impudent to those who didn't fully understand who He was. He asked, *"Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know I had to be in My Father's house?* No, Mary didn't know. It seems neither she nor Joseph fully understood the implications of the statement their son had made to them. They didn't understand that Jesus was under the authority of another Father, a Heavenly One, and Jesus would soon follow that Father's will all the way to the cross. All would be revealed in the fullness of time. Until then, Jesus continued to live in subjection to His earthly parents, and Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

Mary tried to make sense out of the events as they unfolded. We, on the other hand, have the whole written record of Jesus in the Bible. We know the rest of His story: He entered into ministry, performed miracles, claimed to be Son of God, and proclaimed that He was (and is) the way, the

truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Him (Gospel of St John 14:6). He purchased our salvation through His death and resurrection, and someday He is coming again to rule and reign in righteousness. This Christmas season we can celebrate our Savior's birth and share the rest of this glorious story with all who come to celebrate with us.

Reflection Questions

1. What can you do this week to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with your old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of your new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit?
2. On Christmas a Savior was born. What can you do to help others around you know Jesus as their Savior?

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Articles Dealing with Catholic Issues



- My First Visit to a Non-Catholic Church

- The Sandwich

Josephia's Testimony



My life changed significantly I have felt happier, I am. More honest with myself and more calm. My soul/spirit just feels good it feels so different. I have faith in lord and myself and I believe he has my back. I hardly feel sad and when I do feel sad I think of him. I made a effort to pray one I started I never stopped. I talk to him daily and pray to him I could never forget a day or I'll feel bad about myself he's my source for being happy. I use to reject him sadly I use feel he was against me I thought The worst. My life before Christ I felt worthless unhappy and depressed. I even use to cut myself I felt a lot of pain I just thought everyone and god was against me and I'm on 15 years old. Something told me I needed love I needed happiness I needed to feel safe and relaxed I need the lord and ever since I told myself that and accepted Jesus Christ. I'm happy I made that descison.

Danny Masters Skipper Testimony

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I always since I can remember, I do not know if I can clearly go far back as to a infant but I had always the notion, idea that there is a good God that exist in my world or the Universe that which I exist in. I always had the keen sense to question right from wrong, good from evil. I just had faith and my parents where not that religious as a child and we did not participate in a community of certain faiths. I believed there was a God and wanted my parents to know him. And follow the ways and rules philosophy's that he represented.

I still remember having that gut feeling that Jesus Christ, is the answer the way the truth and life. the Jewish Jesus Yeshua that I know him as today. My whole life has been a little crazy with a lot of different interesting people – meets and influences. I have no problem with he concept of God and tried to understand the different ways he is understood and practiced – believed in certain cultures. I take my faith from many experiences and truth and a more book orientated understanding – the Holy Bible word for word. It has taken many years to get to the unselfish understanding I have of him now that hold no resentment or accusations of others to be righteous or religiously politically correct. I believe the challenge to always be right and not considerate of others peoples feelings and truth. Is a hard form of religion and self superstitious righteousness that has no social redemption and values. I believe in the Ten Commandments – I believe in the Covenants that are meant for me as well as the Jews and promises.

I was dealt wit many (personal) confusions and confessions interpretations for years. Other than being a little bot more book smart than most people on the topic of God Jesus – Yahweh – Yeshua – IAM Redemption – The blood and breath of Chrsit. I still have this personal and family – Church journey that I live each and everyday knowing that my God Yeshua / Jesus is the victor of life and purpose. Is a Holy God there for we must be Holy and behave act think in the same respect he gives to us and redemption.

My life has been one trying to get to know and be loved by my God and the better interpretations has always been one of a more protestant non denominational education experience and lived out faith and experiences. Jesus is not just another name or generalized Higher Power or God but God himself and truth not exaggerations of some form than the Holiness he represents and loyalty – love. Yeshua / Jesus is the one who redeemed and paid the price for my sins and those of my decendants and family and those of our faith and Church's he is the true spirit and author of life – this life we have to live till we meet him again in physical glory but is available to us by his spirit that the father sent in his place to live wit us till the end of times. His next dispensations to take effect. I know I am on Gods time not my own – he worked his good pleasure and faith into (my) consciousness there for there is no sub consciousness but whole consciousness as being saved of the Lord Yeshua / Jesus Christ and made truth and spirit not just by mightiness but also love and the effectionist feelings of love that he has towards (us)those that are faithful and in love with him and his totalities all of his spiritual nature – being and essence – person of the most Holy Trinity. With the Father – Son – Holy Ghost. His feelings and words exist hand in hand they are not mere words or actions that have no value merit or feelings – love – grace- relief – mercy – martyrdom – wholeness and more love – actual love and reward for a repented and purpose driven life given to his trust and totality and Faith in us as his loving social able praying ministry's. He saved me from alcohol overdoses – drug addiction – moral decay – fallacy – confusion – lost of soul and spiritual depravity and worse. Even though I have my struggles and there is nothing from past days in this I want except love his love and humans ability to practice compassion and right- eousness from love that remember and can express with total truth and consciousness with confidence. God feels has words speaks and teaches with charismatic grace and understanding like a Father that loves his Child and would do anything to save them him/her. Like the one lost sheep that he went looking for and the ninety nine remained together as good sheep from the same pasture. Life is green and his side of life and the fence between right and wrong we should not live by. There is no compromise but faith – Love – Life. The only liability is to be willing to die for Yeshua's Life and the Grace of his Father,. The Spirit he sent to live in us to be about us and the life of the light that does shine in all darkness bringing light into life and it many circumstances and unusual situations, circumstantial circumstances and compassionate emotions situations that deserve attention, edifications, salutations prayers that save life through the light and the Fathers love and feelings he has for the world for human life – life in a degenerating world. A world where there is still feelings and compassion in the world that coexist in the Holy day and night. Amen.

Solange's Testimony

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Sickness in the life of a believer can be a true test of faith. The Bible says healing is the Children's bread but this can sound like a fairy tale when a believer is faced with a challenge of constant sickness. Are you in such a state and you are wondering if God still hears us? Don't be discouraged dear sister or brother.

I was once in the same state. I was in a desperate state of ill health. I moved from Hospital to hospital. . . . spending time,money,and emotionally drained. I wondered if God had called me or if he even heard prayers. I was so sad to constantly see my parents worry about my condition. Sonetimes it seemed I was better but after a while,i became sick again. i was in pain and my faith in God was dwindling. His word did not seem to make sense to me. . . . until one day,while still in pain I opened my Bible in Job 14 vs 7 which says there is hope for a tree even if it's cut off. it will sprout again and it's shoots will not die. That scripture went through me like a magnet. i knew even in my situation there was still hope. that hope was in prayer. I bent my head and prayed a simple prayer but very sincere. i said "Lord,if you are in heaven and if you have called me. . . then take away this sickness from my body Lord so that I may serve you with all of my heart". I lifted up my head and all was still for a while. The sharp pain in my stomach came again more powerfully than before but after some minutes it went all away. Just like that God took away five years of pain and sickness because I prayed in faith a simple but faith filled prayer to the God who answers by fire. Years of medication became a moment if testimony and ever since I have been thriving in Good and divine health. Wherever you are reading this,just believe. . . God still hears us when we pray from pure and sincere hearts. He will turn that pain into gain just as he did for me. Today I share my testimony to fellow believers to let them know that if there is hope for a tree. . . then certainly there is hope for God's children. Shalom!

Phuong's Testimony



A Devil Got Saved

It was January 30, 2012, and there I was in the Orange County jail in Santa Ana, California. It was around 9:00 p.m. This night was becoming the most fatiguing of my life. After the inmates were locked inside their cells for the evening, I went straight to my bunk to lie down and try to fall asleep – just like on any other night. Within a matter of seconds, my bunky, Long (a.k.a. Dragon Ball), poked his head down from the top bunk:
"Wake up, you silly clown," he said to me. "We need you to stay awake to perform a live circus and entertain us. Dude, your behavior is uniquely weird. I've never seen anyone as hilarious as you! A pathetic clown who is worse than a piece of shit! Just keep in mind, you f#!!! weirdo – this is jail, not a mental hospital, so behave yourself."

"That's enough, Dragon Ball," said a tired voice. That was Dat (a.k.a. Datsun) another inmate. He was supposedly sleeping nearby. I saw Dragon Ball obediently lay down. I looked over to Datsun; he was sitting on his bunk, writing on a piece of paper. Without looking over, he addressed Dragon Ball again. "I'd strongly advise you to not disturb that crazy man; he hasn't slept for nearly five days. It's lucky you just got here. Unfortunately, this crazy dude and I arrived here at this cell at the same time last Wednesday; it was after remodeling, the entire unit was empty. Julio, who sleeps on the bunk above me, came a couple days after. He's been sleeping for most of the time. Then you arrived. I, personally, have never seen anyone acting as strange as this crazy man. It was mind-blowing. At first, I thought he was some type of comedian – a five-star actor. Frankly speaking, he had me laughing so

hard for a good couple of hours. Now, I feel really stupid. Anyway, I thought he would stop at midnight on the first day; but he went on and on. I stopped laughing as I grew agitated. His behavior was clearly out of line. All the inmates in the unit have been talking about him ever since."

"Dudes, what are you talking about?" I asked with a grin, amused at how they were gossiping. "Are you guys stupid or what? I'm not even sleeping. I've been standing right here and listening to you guys the whole time. Look at me, idiots." I waved at them.
I found the silence among us a little awkward. They never looked in my direction. I continued, "OK, speaking of crazy, I really think you guys are the wackos who have eyes but cannot see. Whatever, dudes. Do you really think I give a shit about whether you guys see me or not?"
I assumed they were ignoring me, so I headed to my bunk to lie down. Before jumping in, I looked in and was stunned to see my own body already lying there. Confusing thoughts ran wildly through my mind. I stood there rubbing my eyes as I leaned slightly forward, literally staring at my image. Then, I examined my body like a surgeon, making sure my vision was not deceiving me. Shocked, I took a long step back; my helpless body was clearly unresponsive. At the same time, I felt exhilarated about being separated from my body. I came up with an idea.
I demanded my body in the bed to twist and turn and tried to will my eyes to open. Nothing happened. "Wow," I whispered. "This is virtually impossible. How am I still able to see everything around when my body is lying there with my eyes closed, motionless? Man…this is totally awesome. If I had known things would be like this, I might have hung myself a long time ago."
For the first time in my life, the eerie question popped into my mind: "OH MY GOD, AM I REALLY DEAD?" It made my body shiver and I lost my balance. Panic overcame me.

Within the blink of an eye, standing before me was a group of beautiful naked women, waving and smiling at me. I scratched my head, dizzy with thought. What in the world… How could this be possible? This was a high-security facility. How did all these women get in here? As I looked around, I murmured, "What the hell! How did I get here? Was I not behind bars with other inmates moments ago? Where did the inmates go? Man, what is wrong with me? Why are so many strange things happening to me today?"
As I stood there lost in thought, still trying to figure out what was going on, a seductive female voice caught me by surprise. "Hey! It's OK to join us."
Despite my panic and shakiness, my hungry eyes were overcome with sexual temptations from watching the women kissing and groping each other. I mumbled to myself, "Hell, yeah! This is the golden opportunity of a lifetime. Who cares about the consequences? Why not take advantage of what's at hand and thoroughly enjoy it?"
With a smile, I nodded and began to nervously walk toward the women. Before my second step touched the ground, a sinister laugh stabbed me from behind. "Ha-ha-ha!" It echoed in my ears, sending chills down my spine. I froze like a deer caught in the flood of headlights. The sinister voice continued, "Is this what you wish? I will certainly make you a god among these women, but you must worship only me and do as I say."
The temptation reminded me of a story from the Bible. Jesus was fasting in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights on the mountaintop when He was tempted by the father of all lies. "I will give you power and all the wealth in the world if you worship only me."

Right after I heard Satan's deceitful offer, I immediately decided to stay faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and keep on resisting even if it killed me. I knew Satan was using naked women as a lure to trick me – perhaps Satan thought he knew me well and that it would be easy to bait a sinful man such as me.

Instantly, I threw myself to the ground, down on my hands and knees. I covered my ears super tight and shouted at the top of my lungs: "Listen to what I am saying, Satan; pay attention to what I am telling you! I rebuke you. I want you to stay far away from me. You and I will have nothing to do with each other, nor will I be tempted by you…Please, my Lord Jesus. All I want is to be in Your Heavenly Kingdom. You said that those who confess their sins and believe in You with their whole heart will be with our Father in heaven. With my whole heart and all my soul, I genuinely believe in You. Please forgive me for my dreadful sins. I am truly sorry my evil heart has never been righteous. Your merciful blessing, I desperately need You now more than ever; I do not wish to stay behind here with Satan!"
While I was praying, I was completely unaware of my surroundings. Then, all of a sudden, an incredible force swept me away through the air at lightning speed. Fearful, I squeezed my eyes tightly, and my entire body was trembling uncontrollably. At first, I did not want to believe this terror was real; I thought this kind of horror could only take place in dreams. I forced myself by saying, "Please be calm, Phuong! No need to panic; hurry…wake yourself up…snap out of it like you did before when you had nightmares!"
In that moment of crisis, I was determined to do everything I could to snap back to reality. Within seconds, I realized it would be pointless; no matter how hard I tried to calm myself, this was not a dream. I knew then that my fate was to face the harsh punishment for having lived as a sinful man.

During that darkest journey of my life, my fear intensified rapidly with each passing second. Not knowing what lay ahead, I felt as though my mind was slowly being ripped apart. Paralyzed with fear, I wept like a little boy. All that remained in my conscience was the determination to cling to my faith, constantly seeking mercy from God.
I confessed to the Lord a long list of my evil deeds – I had been living a life of hypocrisy, knowing I would only produce pure evil from the heart, especially robbing people, including my friends and family who had loved me so dearly.

At one point, even though my mind and soul cried out in fear, curiously, I opened my eyes slowly and took a quick glance at my surroundings. What I saw below me was an ocean of calm, blue water that surprisingly filled my soul with terror. I instantly closed my eyes, quickly opening them again to see if there was any land nearby. There was not a single object in sight. I squeezed my eyes tightly again, begging the Lord for forgiveness as my fear continued to rise.

Time passed. I still did not know where I was. Once again, I opened my eyes and was frozen with fear. Directly below me, I saw a massive pit with violent flares of fire. As I continued to reflect, I looked back. For some reason, the blue water was still right behind me.
When my eyes were closed, I thought my final moment had come; this was the end where I would burn in the pit of everlasting fire. I shook my head constantly, crying out to the Lord even louder: "Please not here, Lord! I am just a common thief. I do not deserve this harsh punishment. Why is it

that every time I open my eyes, the situations keep getting more chaotic? Can't You see that I am already scared to the depth of my soul? Please Lord, do not consume me into the hell of fire. Please give me one last chance. I swear I will stay sincere forever; punish me if I ever sin again!"
Right after I made the promise, for reasons unbeknown to me, I began to slow down. I opened my eyes and threw my hands toward the sky, shouting with happiness: "Thank You, Lord, for saving a worthless person like me!" I was overwhelmed with joy. The feeling of having my composure back was indescribable – a lifetime's worth peace of mind. As soon as my mind stabilized and my eyes focused, a gigantic, grayish mountain slowly came into view. As I went around the mountain, my entire body felt like a feather. Amazingly enough, I slowly began to ascend toward the heavens.
Looking down, to my right, I saw uncountable men and women indulging in a ravenous orgy around a river. Then, noises of people screaming forced me to look over to the left. At first, I did not know what all the chaos was about. Focusing my eyes so that I could see more clearly, I could not believe what I was seeing – people were climbing on top of each other's shoulders; they were trying to build a human ladder.
My gaze fixated on a woman; she was falling from above. A man extended his arm to catch her, screaming, "Hurry, grab my hand, try not to fall down and keep on building until we reach the top!"
It was heart-wrenching to see the woman screaming in pain, as she continued to climb back up. However, I was following my instincts, choosing not to feel sympathetic for those lost souls; my instinct was telling me that when they existed on earth, their hearts had stayed loyal to one singular thing – Satan's spell. Now, their fate had been sealed – the wrath of God had been unleashed upon them.
For the very first time in my life, I heard a very gentle voice. It was clearly coming down from heaven, saying, "Your faith has saved you, whatever you ask, you shall receive."
Immediately, I lowered my head and said, "Thank You, Lord, for saving a useless person like me."
Then I asked the Almighty Lord for permission to go visit my father in hell, and He permitted it without hesitation. I praised the Lord. Then, I snapped the fingers of my left hand; but I realized my other hand made a clearer snapping sound. Thus, I disappeared with a snap of my right fingers.
Miraculously, I found myself standing at the entrance of a pitch-black cave. "Wow, Lord!" I exclaimed. "Your divine power is truly beyond human comprehension. Thank You for blessing me with my desired request."
Startled, to my left was a guard sitting with a book on top of a table. "Excuse me, sir," I began. "I have come to see Dong Lap Nguyen." The guard picked up the book, skimming its pages, and said in an unfriendly tone, "Go!"
Once again, with just the simple snap of my fingers, I was standing before my father. Shocked, I saw him pacing back and forth behind prison bars. It brought me pure sadness to hear his agonized voice as he cried out over and over again—"Where am I…Where am I?"
"Dad!" I shouted, immediately causing him to stop pacing as he tried to figure out where my voice was coming from.
"May I ask…" I began nervously, "do you remember having a son named Phuong Lap Nguyen when you were on earth?"
"Yes, I do remember." He nodded. He replied with obvious discomfort, having a hard time figuring out where my voice was coming from.

Excited about seeing my father for the first time in a long time in nearly three decades, I pounded on my chest several times and said, "Dad, this is me. I am your son!"
"How did you find me?" he asked sadly, still finding it difficult to see me.
"God granted my wish come to see you, Dad." My father did not say anything; he was looking to the ground. I continued, "Dad, you should have known from the moment you saw yourself out of your own body that you had the ultimate chance to repent for your sins. But why, Dad? Why did you continue to cling on to the immoral temptation and let Satan trick you and snatch you away? All you had to do was reject Satan's temptation; you would have been automatically saved, just as I was."
"I had too much water in my system," he responded. "That was why I had forgotten all about the Lord."
There was a moment of silence. Letting out a long sigh, I continued, "Dad, I will never desert you! You still have me, your son. I am going to do my best to ask our Lord that He may set you free from this life of real misery and torture."
I could tell by my father's voice that he deeply regretted falling into Satan's devious trap. Even to this day, I have never understood what my father's statement meant – "I had too much water in my system."
After the short visit to my father, I was curious about what the inmates were doing back in their cell; the cell where my body still lay. Another snap. I found myself standing in the same place where I was not long ago. Looking around slowly, I heard an inmate say, " Look at this f##!!! weirdo. His eyes burst wide open, lying there looking up with a dead stare. He scares the shit out of me and makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up."
I chuckled at the inmate's statement. I knew I was invisible and that no one would notice my presence.
Shortly, I grew bored of lingering around and decided to go back to the place from where I had previously risen. Before departing, I took one last look around and said, "Farewell everybody. Make me disappear now from this complicated world."
Once again, I was rising slowly to the heavens just like before. This time, as I looked around, I noticed other souls rising as well. There, down on my left, was an extremely remote desert with an unimaginable number of people standing in a straight line, waiting for their turn to build the human ladder. A moment later, I once again heard a voice coming from heaven. "Your faith has saved you. Whatever you ask, you shall receive." Giving thanks to the Lord, I asked, my finger pointing to the human ladder. "What are those people doing, my Lord?"
"They are trying to build a stairway to get up here," He responded.
"Will they ever make it, Lord?" I asked.
"Never!" The Lord said.
"Pardon me once again, Lord. Will they ever get hungry? I asked since I could see nothing around except hot steaming sands.
"These ignorant people are desperately trying to attain salvation," said the Lord. "They have forgotten about all their needs."
"Oh, I see. Thank You, Lord, for answering all my questions," I said with sincere gratitude.
A few seconds passed. Then, a voice I had heard before said from the heavens, "Your faith has saved you. Whatever you ask, you shall receive."

I praised the Lord, gave Him thanks, and asked, "With Your consent, my Lord, please permit me to my previous life so that I may share with my brothers and sisters the revelations of after death that I have just truly witnessed."
"Go, if that is what you want!" He said in the tone that I perceived to be almost disappointed.
Astonished, my eyes were now wide open. The first thing I did was pinch my cheeks and forearms to see if I was able to feel pain.
I nervously looked around to see what my cellmates were doing. All the bunks appeared to be completely empty. After I finished washing my face, I laid down and walked myself through what had just happened – a fear that could never be erased for the rest of my life. Recalling my supernatural journey down to its last detail, I came to realize that my father was corrupted by darkness. For this reason, my father had not been able to see me but had only been able to hear my voice. I was very sad for my father; my tears flowed faster than my heartbeat. Afterward, I felt exhausted, which made me fall asleep fast.

I was a conniving master manipulator, a deceiver, a cold-scandalous con-artist, and a cowardly bastard who did not deserve to live! If you want to know more about my unspeakable sins, read a full version – A Devil Got Saved – to understand my lengthy career in the criminal playgrounds.
Satan is the father of all temptations, as is known by all. So ask yourself this – Can you resist the ultimate temptation that Satan has been waiting to send you, which will take you directly to hell upon your death? Truth is the greatest tool in life. I have personally witnessed it. It is all described inside… It would be my honor to walk you through my experience; perhaps it might help you as well.

Contact Facebook/adevilgotsaved
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