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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-10-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a story from 1 Kings that tells how God provided food in a time of drought for a faithful prophet through a poor widow who trusted God and gave all she had. Then we move into the book of Hebrews and learn how Jesus has provided a superior and final sacrifice for our sin. We conclude with a reading from the Gospel of St. Mark where Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy and commends humble, sacrificial faith.

Introduction to the First Reading:

In First Kings 17, the lives of a wicked king, a faithful prophet, and a poor widow converges when God sends a punishing drought upon the land. As God judges the evil, He simultaneously and miraculously preserves the faithful.

A little review of Israel's history is a necessary backdrop to this passage. The people of God were composed of twelve tribes descended from Abraham's grandson Jacob (renamed Israel in Genesis 35:10). These descendants and the land God gave them for a home were called Israel. From them,

the Messiah Jesus would come, and through His salvation all the nations of the world would be blessed.

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

A series of kings reigned in Judah. Some followed the Lord, and some did not. In Israel, a different series of kings reigned, each one more evil than the previous one. Eventually, King Ahab came to power, and he "*did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him* (1 Kings 16:33)." He married Jezebel, a foreign woman, and created places of worship for her gods—Baal and Asherah. It was to this idolatrous, evil king that Elijah came as a prophet of God to proclaim judgment on Israel.

Elijah prophesied, "*As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word*." In the ensuing drought, God miraculously provided food for Elijah. One of the ways He did this was through an unlikely source–a poor widow woman.

When Elijah's source of drinking water dried up, God sent him to a widow in Zarephath. Elijah arrived just as the widow was gathering wood to cook a final meal for her and her son. She had only enough flour and oil to make a little loaf of bread, and after that she believed she and her son would die. When Elijah requested bread from her, the widow explained her plight. Elijah promised her that God would not let the flour and oil run out until the day God sent rain upon the earth. Why the widow believed Elijah we do not know. But placing her trust in Elijah and Elijah's God, she did as he requested. God kept His promise, and the widow, her son, and Elijah were miraculously spared.

The story begins in 1 Kings 17:8. You will want to begin reading there and continue through the First Reading (v. 10-16).

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First Reading:

> *1 Kings 17:10-16 NAS95 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." 11 As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." 12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." 13 Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. 14 "For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" 15 So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah.*

Elijah and the widow trusted God, and God kept His promise. We may never go through a drought to the extent that happened during that time, but we might experience a job loss or setback that greatly affects our ability to provide for ourselves and our family. The same God who took care of Elijah and the widow knows our needs, too. Philippians 4: 13 says, "*And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."* He is a faithful God who never changes. Like the widow of Zarephath, we can trust Him to provide.

It is rare, though, for God to provide through a direct miracle as He did when the flour and oil did not run out. More often He lays the need on the hearts of His people and moves us to give. After all, everything we have belongs to God. We are merely stewards or managers of it. Every time we pray for God to provide for someone's need, we should ask God if He wants any of our stuff (money, food, belongings) to be the provision for that need. The widow did not fear to give all she had. We don't need to fear either.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were experiencing persecution and, as a result, were contemplating returning to Judaism. The writer of Hebrews explains how Jesus is superior to all things under Judaism. He is greater than Moses, the Old Covenant, the Old

Testament priesthood, and the earthly tabernacle with its animal sacrifices.

A reminder of the Old Testament sacrificial system would be helpful here. When an Israelite sinned, he would bring an animal (often an unblemished lamb) to the priest in the tabernacle. The priest would sacrifice the animal and shed its blood on the altar for the remission of sins. Behind a heavy curtain was the Holy of Holies where God would appear in a pillar of cloud or fire. No one could go in there except the high priest, and he could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would make a sacrifice for himself (for he is a sinner, too) and for the sins of all the people and carry the blood inside the curtain, presenting it to God. The sacrifices had to be repeated year after year since they were never able to perfect the worshipper. They were only a foreshadowing of the ultimate sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Jesus) who takes away the sin of the world (Gospel of St. John 1: 29).

The Second Reading shows us that Jesus, as the mediator of a new covenant, is superior in every way.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 9:24-28 NAS95 24 For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, 28 so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.*

Jesus Himself is the high priest who entered into the holy place, not an earthly one made by human hands, but into heaven itself. There He presented to God, not the blood of animals as a sacrifice for sin, but His own blood. Because Jesus was perfect, God accepted His sacrifice as final. There is no need for any other.

He is coming a second time to receive all believers to Himself, and we eagerly await that day! Will you be ready to meet Him when He comes?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Many people in our parishes follow the practices of the church because they love God. Some, however, follow the rituals because they want to be thought of as "religious." Their concern is not so much how God sees them, but how others see them. They are not so much interested in pleasing God as they are in impressing others. Some of the religious leaders of Jesus day were like that, too.

In the immediate setting of the Gospel Reading, religious leaders were pretending to be interested in Jesus, but they were actually trying to trick Him with difficult questions in order to discredit Him. Knowing their motives, Jesus confounded them with His superior wisdom until they had nothing left to say.

Jesus warned the crowd to beware of religious leaders who flaunt their religion for self-serving reasons— for personal gain or to be seen and respected by men. Instead, Jesus pointed out a poor widow and her small gift as an example of sincere faith, for she gave it quietly and sacrificially. Others gave out of their surplus, but she gave out of her poverty.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 12:38-44 NAS95 38 In His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, 39 and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, 40 who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation." 41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. 43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; 44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."*

Our religious acts of service are to be done humbly and quietly out of love for God, not as a means to impress men and earn favor with God. God already looks favorably on us not because of what we have or what we do, but because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. God is not looking for impressive external religion, but sincere and sacrificial devotion of the heart.

Reflection Questions

1. Jesus was the perfect and final sacrifice for sin. God looks on us with favor not because of what we have or what we do, but because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. How does this truth affect your day-to-day relationship with God? Think of a recent example in which faith in Jesus changed your interaction.

2. Do a heart check this week. Are there any ways in which you are practicing your religion to impress people instead of an expression of sincere devotion of the heart?

Some Thoughts on Bible Study and the Millennial Reign of Christ

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CCCT:

Culture

Context

Covenant

Totality

Consider these four aspects when reading the Bible. Can we agree upon a basic Bible study framework approach? Here is one that I learned during Seminary. Read the text and consider it in light of four aspects:

Culture. Consider the culture in which the text was writing. For example, in the ancient near east (ANE) biblical culture the practice of animal sacrifice was commonplace among not only the Jews

but also the various pagan religions. Today that practice rarely exists but it was passing away during the New Testament era.

Context. Consider the context of the passage. Who was speaking and to whom were they speaking? Was it Jesus speaking to His disciples alone, or were others also listening? Was it Paul addressing the Ephesian believers or were pagans also hearing?

Covenant. The conditions under the Mosaic Covenant were very different than those under Abraham and the New Covenant. We must recognize God's covenants in which the message was delivered. Adam and Eve would not have understood the rules of the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant. When we read the New Testament we read in light of understanding of all of them.

Totality. When we study, we read in light of the totality of God's revelation. Abraham may not have understood the Book of Revelation. However, we read Revelation in light of Abraham. We read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament.

In light of this, we can look at Matthew 16:27-28.

The transfiguration was only a partial fulfillment of what Jesus was telling his small private group. Only some of them saw Jesus and Moses at the transfiguration, however, none of the prophecies concerning Jesus' second coming were fulfilled, also at Pentecost.

There is so much more to this in terms of what will be fulfilled at Jesus' second coming. Hundreds of prophecies were fulfilled at His first coming. Hundreds more will be at His second coming.

The Kingdom about which Jesus is speaking is an "already, not yet" kingdom. It was there then but is yet coming in the future. There are many books on the aspects of the Kingdom of God, much more than I can say in a few paragraphs.

Elijah will return again, literally. He came literally back in the Old Testament days, then a type of

Elijah came as John the Baptist. Elijah will return again before the return of Jesus.

The return of the Lord Jesus will bring about the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God as it is termed in the Bible. When Jesus returns he will wage war (Revelation 19:11-16). All nations will gather against the holy city of Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:2). This is the first battle called Armageddon. Jesus will physically return just like the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation, most likely including both Elijah and Enoch. The Mount of Olives will be split in two, and on that Day there will be a very unique day with no distinction between day and night.

The sky will be rolled up like a scroll (Revelation 6:14) and all the mountains will be moved out of their places.

The earth will be reaped, meaning all living will be judged (Daniel 12:2 and Revelation 14:14-20).

Everyone both dead and alive will be judged as per Revelation 20:4. A general resurrection will occur per Daniel 12:2 and Revelation 20:4. Believers will "come to life" for a thousand years. Non believers will not come to life but will remain in the grave. Satan will be bound during this time (Rev 20:3)

Every mountain will be made flat, see Isaiah 40:4 and Revelation 16:20-21.

The Dead Sea will become fresh water. Ezekiel 47:8

The entire world will live in peace (Isaiah 11:6-9, and 32;18).

At the start of the 1,000 years everyone will worship the One True God (see Isaiah 2:2-3).

The 1,000 year reign of Christ is the fulfillment of:

-The kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 3:2)

-The Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15)

-The World to Come (Hebrews 2:5)

-The Times of Refreshing (Acts 3:19)

-The period of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21)

-A kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28)

There will be no wars during Jesus' reign. See Zechariah 9:10 and others.

Jerusalem will become the Holy City and all Nations will go to it. See Micah 4:1-2 and Zechariah 14:16-17

Only believers will be allowed to walk the road to Jerusalem. See Isaiah 35:1-10.

All animals will be at peace with one another, see Isaiah 11:6-7.

Everyone on earth will know God. See Isaiah 11:9.

The earth will be totally productive for crops. See Joel 3:18.

People will live as long as trees do. See Isaiah 65:2.

All suffering will cease. See Isaiah 29:18, Isaiah 65:13-15

However, unbelievers born during this time will be allowed to sin. See Isaiah 66:24, Zechariah 14:16-19

The full land grant will be made to the Jews during this time, they had previously never possessed all of the land promised to them per Genesis 15:18-20. The land grant was made to the Jews to be forever, this was not yet attained by them.

God's Davidic Covenant said that a ruler would sit on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:16). This was not yet confirmed. This will be confirmed through Jesus' eternal reign. Once Jesus comes He will never leave again. Jesus' reign begins in Revelation 20:4 and 20:6. The Jews understood that Jesus was to be their ruler, see how Jesus rode into Jerusalem in Matthew 21:1-17. Zechariah clearly predicted this, see Zechariah 14:9.

Jesus will rule and reign on the earth after the Day of the Lord's wrath. Jesus will remain on the earth even during and after the final battle. The final battle of Gog and Magog will not come until the end of the 1,000 years.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-10-2021

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. I remember the time when I came home from the office and I saw an ambulance in my neighbor's driveway. Harvey was a man that had retired from the assembly line at General Motors. He was a rough-around-the-edges kind of guy, not someone that you would find going to church each Sunday although his wife did regularly attend. Harvey had struggled with sepsis and had been very close to dying. I had wondered about his spiritual beliefs, and I was sad that I had never shared with him the faith that I had in Jesus Christ. He pulled through this episode, but had horrible ongoing issues, including kidney failure and the need for dialysis three times a week. After Harvey returned home, I finally got up the courage to send him a letter explaining the facts of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Even though I could not break through to him face to face, I figured that he would at least read the letter. I explained that his continuing life was evidence of a miracle from God. Later I moved to a far-away state, but I kept in frequent touch with Harvey by cell phone. I never saw any signs of spiritual life in him, but I maintained the relationship, and we developed a closer relationship than we had had when he was living across the street.

This week we will examine two very deep readings dealing with the important subject of eternal life. We will see in the first reading that the author used the Old Testament as a means of providing an important spiritual lesson for his readers. Then we will learn how Jesus answered a bold question about how to obtain eternal life. If you stick with us, you will also learn about what happened to my friend Harvey.

Introduction to the First Reading:
The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

First Reading:

Wis 7:7-11 I prayed, and prudence was given me;
I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.
I preferred her to scepter and throne,
and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her,
nor did I liken any priceless gem to her;
because all gold, in view of her, is a little sand,
and before her, silver is to be accounted mire.
Beyond health and comeliness I loved her,
and I chose to have her rather than the light,
because the splendor of her never yields to sleep.
Yet all good things together came to me in her company,
and countless riches at her hands.

In this reading we find the theme of wisdom personified, something which is featured in many ancient Greek writings. Here, wisdom is preferred over kingship, priceless gems, silver, and good health. Wisdom, especially the biblical wisdom of God, is something to be extremely valued. Also, if we desire wisdom, we should ask for it. The Bible says in the Book of James, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Finally, understand that wisdom comes not only from the Word of God, but also from the godly counsel of others, and through the experience of trials that God allows in our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:
The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews, which we also studied last week. This week's reading follows the author's warning in chapter 4 about falling short of true salvation. The writer is providing a clear warning about the sin of unbelief by using the story about what had happened to the unbelieving Jews wandering in the desert. Saint Paul explained the use of the Old Testament Scriptures this way. "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). The writer of Hebrews expects his readers to be aware of the Old Testament writings and to

take them to heart!

Hebrews 4 begins with the conjunction "therefore," connecting what he is about to say with the previous section. The author had explained the danger of the sin of unbelief. Those that don't believe, he said, would not enter God's rest, meaning the Promised Land. "And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:18-19). He is referring to the report of the spies after they had checked out the land they were to enter. "So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size'" (Numbers 13:32). The unbelievers were those who had accepted the majority report given by the spies after they had surveyed the Land. Moses said that the people wouldn't enter their physical rest through entrance into the Promised Land because of their unbelief, but the writer uses this Old Testament story as a metaphor to teach a much more significant application.

Unbelievers then and now will also not enter into God's eternal rest, since the only unforgivable sin in the Bible is the sin of unbelief (Mark 3:28-30). This explanation provides clarity to chapter 4:1, "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it." The author is drawing a metaphor from the Old Testament experience. There the people's physical rest was gained through entrance into the Promised Land. This is compared with his contemporary readers' finding eternal rest by entrance into a relationship with God through faith. Everyone throughout history gains eternal life the same way—through faith in the One True God and his Savior, so the author used the illustration of the unbelieving Jews in the exodus as a warning to his readers about the danger of this unforgivable sin.

As we move to verse 12, where today's reading begins, we see the author's summary statement about the heart of the matter, belief in God's written Word. "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard" (Hebrews 4:2). The writer goes on to explain that entrance into God's rest comes through faith, not works. "For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Hebrews 4:10). Saint Paul, also, emphasized that faith is the basis for salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). With this extensive introduction, which we included because of its direct connection to the Gospel lesson, let us now study the text from today's reading. As you read, keep in mind the key concept of the saving value of faith.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 4:11-13 NAS95 11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

The author warns his readers not to follow the example of disobedience set by the unbelieving Jews in the exodus. The wandering Jews in the wilderness had God's direct testimony to them in many ways, including the revelation of His Law to Moses and His presence with them through the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22). Yet, the Hebrew people still didn't believe God's promises about finding rest in the Promised Land. When Moses sent out spies to survey the Promised Land, only Joshua and Caleb came back bearing the good news about what they saw in the land, and that they were confident about God's promises to them about taking control of it (Numbers 14:6-9). Instead of following this "minority report," the Hebrews believed the majority's view that it would be better to return to Egypt than to attempt to enter the Land. And they then began making plans to do just that (Numbers 14:1-4).

The author uses this spiritual metaphor to warn us not to follow their example of gross disobedience, not believing God, the only unforgivable sin in the Bible. Interestingly, verse 12 opens with the preposition "for," which provides a natural linkage with the immediately preceding context. The opening verse, then, could be read this way, "[With] these previous things in mind, the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . ." In the case of the Hebrews in the exodus the Word of God came to them directly through Moses and the priests. In the case of the New Testament context the Word of God comes through God's written Word. It is this written Word that is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword (v. 12a). The author says that the Word is "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (v. 12d). The Word of God convicts us of our sin through the illumination provided by God's Holy Spirit. "Illumination," in the spiritual sense, is the turning on of the light bulb in the mind of a person regarding the things of God. There are levels of illumination, and the knowledge of sin is the very first and most basic level. This is what the author of Hebrews is getting at in the reading, where he later criticizes his readers because they are spiritual babies able only to partake of spiritual milk and not solid food (Hebrews 5:12). He cautions his readers in the closing verse to remember that they cannot fool God about all of this because "all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him" (v. 13b).

There is one primary application of the reading for us today. The testimony of God given through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Bible must not be neglected by anyone. We must not follow the example of the disobedient Jews in the exodus who did not believe God's promises. Rather, we should believe and follow the only way to God which is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus has made this perfectly clear. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Peter warned the unbelievers in the Book of Acts about rejecting Jesus, when he said, "He (Jesus) is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12). As believers, we follow the minority report given by the godly patriarchs of the faith like Joshua and Caleb. We don't follow the majority view of the unbelieving world, and we work to fulfill the Great Commission in leading others who are on this broad road to the narrow way of life through faith in Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:13-14)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
The Gospel reading continues with the study in Mark. This week's story occurs just after Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees who attempted to trap Him with a question about divorce (Mark 10:2). Jesus referred them to biblical truths from the Old Testament and then privately explained them in further detail to His disciples. Afterwards the crowds brought children to Jesus, and the disciples tried to turn them away, which caused Jesus' rebuke of them (Mark 10:13). As Jesus was preparing to leave this area, He was confronted by a man who asked Him a very important question.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 10:17-30 NAS95 17 As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments, 'DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'" 20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." 21 Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. 23 And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not

with God; for all things are possible with God." 28 Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." 29 Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, 30 but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."

In the reading we see a man who just asked Jesus the most important question in the universe, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 17). Yet in the man's question there is an inherent fallacy. As the crowd was fresh from Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees who were committed "doers" of the Law, the man asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, knowing the man's heart, knew that this man had kept the Ten Commandments, and so He recited the ones dealing with things to do and not to do (v. 19). However, although Jesus didn't question his observance of the Law, He cuts to the heart of the matter for him, his stumbling stone, which was the worship of his personal treasures over the worship of God. Jesus knew that, although the inquirer was following most of the commandments, it was the first one over which he was stumbling: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:2-3). Saint Paul said that it wasn't riches itself that created evil, but that the love of money was the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

Jesus then went on to explain the quandary using an illustration of a needle and camel (v. 25). Some have thought that Jesus was referring to a certain very low gate in Jerusalem, which required the rider and camel to duck down in order to enter. No such gate has ever been located in Jerusalem, and if there were such a gate, it wouldn't prove that a man can enter the kingdom of heaven through his good works. Instead, what Jesus was teaching was it is impossible to gain eternal life through any good works, but that it is offered only by God's gracious provision alone. Even rich people, Jesus explained, can enter the kingdom through faith because "all things are possible with God" (v. 27). Entrance into this kingdom does require sacrifice, though, because one must give up the things he trusts in in order to trust fully and only in God's grace. In the case of the rich man this would mean giving up the "worship" of his riches and turning only to the worship of God. Remember that Jesus had just told the people to take drastic actions regarding the things which were keeping them from following Him: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43 On one occasion Peter told Jesus that he had given up everything to follow Him, to which Jesus replied that he, and anyone who gave up something for Jesus, would receive a hundred times what was given up (v. 30). In other words, the investment in Jesus would be worth it, with a ten thousand percent return on investment in the present age, with eternal life thrown in, to boot.

What does this mean for us today? We cannot overstate the importance of the application of Jesus' teaching in these few verses. First, we cannot earn eternal life by doing anything; that comes only through belief in Jesus Christ alone. Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners and cannot change that without the outside intervention of God, no matter how hard we try. The rich man in the story tried very hard, yet even he was unable to cleanse his heart through keeping the commandments. When measured against God's perfect standard, he fell far short, and Jesus revealed to him that he had disobeyed the first and most important commandment, loving God above everything else. If we think we can be saved by our good works, or that our good works are meritorious towards salvation, Paul explains the relationship between faith and works. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10, emphasis added). Paul said, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5, emphasis added). Our good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ as the result of a heart that has been changed by God, or "born from above (or again)." Jesus told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3b). Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus until later in his life, but God saw to it that his story was recorded in the Bible so that we could identify with this "Nick at Night."

What about us, are we relying upon something other than God to earn our way into heaven? Are we like the rich man, who was likely very generous in giving, withholding our true worship of God alone? Do we believe the minority report offered up by men of faith, or following the majority view of those who shrink back from following God, or who try to purchase their way into heaven through their supposed good works, no matter how valid they may be? Do we think that we can duck low enough to ride our camel through some super-secret entrance gate into heaven? These are powerful things for us to ponder, and we can be overjoyed that God has given us clear answers from His Holy Word. "Our good works are the true riches that we will be able to present to God as evidence of salvation. Jesus called it our "bearing of fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

I introduced my former neighbor Harvey in the introduction to this week's lesson. After I moved away, I kept in touch with Harvey and also developed a closer relationship with his wife who kept me up to date on the various emergencies that developed concerning my friend. One weekend I travelled back to my former town to visit some friends who just happened to live down the street from my former home and my friend Harvey. One night I had a strange sense that something was going on with Harvey and I planned to visit him the following morning. After I awoke the next morning, I received a call from his daughter who told me that Harvey had passed away early that morning. She explained that the local pastor was with Harvey, and that he had requested to be baptized before he died. Harvey evidently gave testimony regarding his faith in Jesus. Harvey proceeded with this bold testimony of faith by submitting to baptism and died a short time later. A

few days later I had the opportunity to meet the pastor at the funeral luncheon. I explained to him how Harvey had been deeply moved by the frequent visits of his church's members during years as he suffered from declining health. As his eyes began to well up with tears, along with my own, I told him that his faithful service and that of his church were the reasons that Harvey trusted in the Lord Jesus. I told him that Harvey often spoke about their visits and how thankful I was that they had served him in this way.

As I reflect upon what Harvey meant to me, I remember that at some point God had prompted me to begin praying for Harvey. God gave me a sense that salvation was possible even for Harvey, no matter what my feelings told me about the matter. Just to check, I plugged his name into a Google search and was greeted with his smiling face from his memorial page. That reminded me that Harvey is alive forever in heaven, and one day I will visit him again. I have asked God to make this man one of the first people that I meet when I get to heaven. The evidence of his changed life just before he died has been a life-changing event for me. His testimony provides me with hope that God can reach even those we think are too hard to reach.

What about you, is there someone in your life who you feel is would never believe, but yet God seems to keep having you bump into them? Will you pray to begin reaching out to them in even the smallest ways, and that God would embolden you to share the story of how Jesus has changed your life?

Reflection Questions

1. We saw in the opening verse of the passage from Hebrews (which was omitted from the reading) this key sentence: "11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). Later we provided this verse from Saint Paul. "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).
   List and discuss how you have benefited from studying the lives of two specific biblical characters in the Old Testament. In what ways have you learned from their obedience or disobedience?
2. What you understand about the relationship between faith and works in terms of gaining eternal life? Second, how does your position correspond to what James said, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:17).

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-22-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. This week the readings focus upon the theme of God calling people to walk in a personal relationship with Him. In the first reading from Joshua, we see a challenge issued by God to forsake the false gods the people's ancestors served. In the second reading, Saint Paul teaches about the relationship between man and his wife and the mystery of how this parallels that between the Father and the Son. In the Gospel lesson, we study a story where Jesus' followers came to a point of decision concerning His identity as God in the flesh, the promised Messiah, the nature of whom they misunderstood.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Joshua who was the successor to Moses after the Exodus and the one who led the Hebrew people across the Jordan after Moses' death. The reading today provides an overview of the monumental charge from Joshua to serve the One true God.

First Reading:

Joshua 24:1-18 NAS95 1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented

themselves before God. 2 Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. 3 'Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac. 4 'To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and to Esau I gave Mount Seir to possess it; but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. 5 'Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt by what I did in its midst; and afterward I brought you out. 6 'I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and Egypt pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. 7 'But when they cried out to the LORD, He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea upon them and covered them; and your own eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness for a long time. 8 'Then I brought you into the land of the Amorites who lived beyond the Jordan, and they fought with you; and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land when I destroyed them before you. 9 'Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel, and he sent and summoned Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. 10 'But I was not willing to listen to Balaam. So he had to bless you, and I delivered you from his hand. 11 'You crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho; and the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Girgashite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Thus I gave them into your hand. 12 'Then I sent the hornet before you and it drove out the two kings of the Amorites from before you, but not by your sword or your bow. 13 'I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.' 14 "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." 16 The people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. 18 "The LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God."

After forty years of wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses, the people who were still alive migrated across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Upon entering the land they encountered many obstacles the foremost of which was their immersion into a culture of idolatry which wasn't too different from that which plagued Abraham's father Terah (v. 2). Joshua presented to them the heart of the matter by saying, "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living" or the One true God (v. 15). This was God's call to the people for a relationship with Him with the terms of the relationship being to serve Him alone and not the gods of the surrounding nations. The people answered that they would indeed serve the Lord God

and not the gods of the Amorites.

We know from reading the rest of the Scriptures how short-lived the Hebrew's promise was not to serve other gods and in effect creating a division between the true followers of God and the rest of the people. Because of their disobedience, God later sent foreign nations to invade their land including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. Joshua was in the first camp, saying "but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (v. 15). As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, Jesus confronts the people with a similar decision. Will they follow Him, or instead follow their religious traditions? Will they follow the Father God, or their father the devil? Will they enter by the narrow road, Jesus, or follow the broad road to destruction (Matthew 7:13)?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians 5. The context leading up to this passage is a treatise on how Christians should relate to one another. Saint Paul's teaching then zeros in on the model of submission between a husband and his wife, linking this as a reflection of the relationship between God the Son and God the Father, as well the church to Christ.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 5:21-33 NAS95 21 and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. 22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. 28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30 because we are members of His body. 31 FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. 32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

The big idea in the reading is the nature of the relationship that exists between the believer and God. In the same way that the Jews in the first reading had a decision to make regarding their spiritual direction, all believers, not just Christian husbands and wives, have to come to grips with their personal relationship to God and how He calls them to live out this relationship with Him. Paul opens the reading by saying that everyone (married, unmarried, widows, and widowers) must "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (v. 21). This is the foundational concept upon which he builds his explanation of biblical submission between and woman and her husband, which parallels the mysterious relationship that exists between Jesus and the Father (v. 32). Because "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28) we too are to serve others in mutual submission to God ("in the fear of Christ," v. 21). This includes not only wives serving their husbands, but husbands serving their wives and everyone serving each other in the church family. For Paul said in 1 Corinthians, "But now there are many members, but one body" (1 Corinthians 12:21).

Continuing upon the relational concept in the reading, Paul described how the husband is the visible leader of the family by using the word translated "head" (v.23), which in the original Greek connoted "something that can be seen and taken a hold of." The idea is that the wife is to voluntarily place herself under the leadership of her husband. In the same way that Jesus is equal to God the Father, but different in His role, so the wife is equal in status to her husband, but different in her role. Jesus' submission to the Father does not make Him inferior (Philippians 2:6-11), only obedient. So, too, the wife's submission to her husband in the Lord does not make her inferior to her husband, but it does allow her to be obedient to God. This model of the harmonious union between one man and one woman goes all the way back to the Book of Genesis: "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH" (v. 31). The unity between the man and the woman in marriage parallels the mysterious relationship between Christ and the church (v. 32). The Bible is clear that both the man and woman are called to be in mutual submission to God, while the woman is to submit to her husband and the man to God as the final authority. The man is called by God to be the visible ruler of the family by first separating himself from the headship of his own father (v. 31). This is the man's conscious point of decision to leave his earthly father and join with his wife in a new relationship that leads to unity under his Father God. It's as if God tells the man, choose whom you will serve.

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus' teaching of the crowds resulted in their coming to their own point of decision regarding whom they would serve.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading from John marks an important point in his Gospel concerning a point of decision and division. The reading contains the famous John 6:66 passage, the numbering of which brings with it the idea of the mark of the Antichrist, the great divider who is to come in the future who will separate the true believers from among everyone in the world. The concept comes from the Book of Revelation. *"16 And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, 17 and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. 18 Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six"* (Revelation 13:16-18). In the End Times the people will be given one final choice regarding who they will serve. At this point God will make a clear division between the followers of God and the only other choice, the followers of the AntiChrist. In the Gospel reading, Jesus' teaching reaches a similar climax in which Jesus calls the people to a personal relationship with Him. Although they are not outright called to decide to which camp they belong, a clear division occurs beginning in John 6:66 which begins the separation of the wheat and the chaff (Matthew 3:12). God uses these moments of decision to reveal His true followers such as the occasion in which Saint Paul stated, "For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Gospel Reading:

John 6:60-69 NAS95 60 Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble? 62 What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. 65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." 66 As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. 67 So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" 68 Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. 69 We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

This story in John marked the beginning of several such points of decision in which the people were challenged to choose between the ways of God by following Jesus or the ways of man by following false religion and their own traditions. In this reading, the people came to the point of decision when they had heard Jesus' prior statements about Him being the "bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:58). The conflict that the people had with Jesus that caused their grumbling (John 6:43) was

that they were familiar with Jesus' father Joseph and also his mother (John 6:42). Jesus was calling Himself God and since they knew his earthly parents, they reasoned that He could not be God. The people also misunderstood the nature of the Messiah because just a few verses later they said, "However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from" (John 7:27). This point of division continued into the group of His twelve disciples, for Jesus knew that one of them (Judas) had already separated himself from Him. The grumbling of the larger group of disciples then resulted in a separation of the true followers of God and everyone else. As this separation occurred, Jesus presented to the twelve a challenge causing Peter to take a stand for Jesus, affirming everything that Jesus had been saying about Himself. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (vv. 68-69).

This passage teaches us that belief in Jesus is the way to eternal life. Some of the Jews were offended that Jesus, a mere man in their eyes, would claim to be God. However, if He was the Messiah, then His demand for their belief and loyalty was justified. In some sense, everyone has to come to terms with Jesus' claim to be the only way to eternal life. Some will be like the offended Jews, who stumbled over what they saw as far-fetched claims and rejected Jesus' lordship over their lives. But others respond like Peter and say: "Lord" (which is a good way to start a sentence when you are talking to God in the flesh) . . . "You have the words of eternal life" (vv. 68-69). May we continue to believe in Christ as Lord and let Him work in us the type of life that leads to eternity with the Father.

One day while I was driving, I happened upon a man walking in the afternoon along the road who seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. He was wearing black wingtip shoes, which kind of stuck out to me. I had never seen this particular man before. My spirit prompted me to pull beside him and offer him a ride, which he gladly accepted. He told me that his bicycle had broken down and that he was on his way to work at the local supermarket. I encountered this man several times over the course of the next few months and each time he presented himself in such a kind, godly way that I actually began to think that he was an angel. As he found out more about my faith he began to praise and glorify God for all that He had done in my life. Perhaps it was because I didn't know him very well, but each time we met I sensed his close relationship with God. It also helped that his real name was Angelo! It wasn't until I met his wife that I finally understood he really was just a man (see Matthew 22:30).

After several encounters with Angelo, it really got me thinking about how **I** come across to the random people that I meet. Does my public persona match how I come across to people personally? How about my persona on Facebook; does it match what I truly believe? Considering Facebook, it seems to me to be okay to post that you are attending a Saturday afternoon wine tasting session;

however, it is problematic when all that a person posts is about food and wine.

Like Angelo, when people meet us we should exhibit the markings of a follower of Jesus Christ. Which path are you **continuing** to choose in your daily walk with God? Joshua said in the first reading, "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD," "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:14, 15b). Paul said in the second reading to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 51), a behavior which can only be done through the empowerment of God's Holy Spirit as a new creation in Christ. Finally, Jesus said, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" (John 6:67b). Each day we have to choose the forsake "Egypt" and choose the pathway to walk with God. Although we make certain bad choices at times that dishonor God, the Scripture says that "if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Reflection Questions

1. What have been some of the turning points in your life, especially as you consider your relationship with God? How have you turned from being offended by Christ's radical call on your life to a place of surrender and submission to His lordship? Are there areas of your life that you are still wrestling for control? How might these passages help you to surrender anew to His lordship?

2. If someone watched your life, choices and attitudes, to whom or what would they attribute your devotion, worship and loyalty? What things would they see to show them that you are choosing this day (and every day) to serve the Lord? What things would give a conflicted and confusing message to them of your heart's true home?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-30-2021

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 4:32-40 NAS95 32 Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? 33 Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived? 34 Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35 To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. 36 Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. 37 Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, 38 driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in and to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is today. 39 Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other. 40 So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The first reading is from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is how as believers we are heirs with Christ, not only in His exultation but also in His suffering (Romans 5:3, Romans 8:17). As we just looked at God's warning given to Moses about the requirement for obedience, we see in the verses in Romans leading up to today's reading how God provides us with the Holy Spirit to empower us to obey. "[F]or if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14). We pick up with today's reading in verse 14.

Second Reading:

Romans 8:14-17 NAS95 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 28:16-20 NAS95 16 But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. 17 When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. 18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

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

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

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Reflection Questions

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

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

Jim Speaking at Decatur First Reformed Church



This is Jim Hill speaking at Decatur First Reformed Church on February 8, 2004.

This is what I looked like way back then- how things have changed!



Jim Hill in his office in Southfield, Michigan, in the year 2002.

To play the audio file just click the button below. The audio is 50 minutes long.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-23-2020



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

Before we begin, I will briefly review the format and method of these weekly study notes. The format can be understood from the acronym A-B-C but starting from the "C" and working backwards: context, big idea, and application. First, we provide the full scriptural context of the text including verses that were omitted in the reading. We also provide the historical context along with the background and setting of the author. Second, we study the text in light of its historical context to determine the theological big idea. We develop this in light of a "Christological" focus, that is upon

the redemptive message found throughout the Bible of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, whether in a future context as in the Old Testament or in a present or historical context as in the New Testament. We do not rely upon an allegorical interpretation but instead use the historical critical method and refer to the original languages and parallel passages whenever necessary. Finally, we provide several applications of the text for the present day Christian. Although there is usually only one main interpretation of the text, there are many possible applications. With these guiding principles in mind, let's move onto the first reading.

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

First Reading:

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

19 I will depose you from your office, And I will pull you down from your station. 20 Then it will come about in that day, That I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, 21 And I will clothe him with your tunic And tie your sash securely about him. I will entrust him with your authority, And he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, When he shuts no one will open. 23 "I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, And he will become a throne of glory to his father's house.

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

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

Now let's read the actual second reading.

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Second Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

Several significant points jump out of the text. First, Peter, the uncontested leader or the disciples, made the marvelous statement through the help of God the Father that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (v. 16). Jesus affirmed his confession and went on to elaborate upon Peter's statement. What did Jesus mean when He told Peter, "upon this rock I will build my church" (v.18b)? Jesus' meaning is clear when we look one level deeper into the plain meaning found in the original language. Peter, whose name in Greek is "Petros", literally means "rock." However, the foundation on which Jesus spoke about building the church is a different Greek word "petra" which means a mass or rock. In context, what Jesus said was close to this paraphrase: "Simon, I am changing your name to Petros, and upon this petra (foundational mass of rock) I will build my church." Jesus said that He would build His church upon the foundation (petra, meaning mass of rock or many large rocks), which, in context, is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. However, Jesus clearly indicated that Peter was the foremost of these building blocks, the "first among equals." Peter, with his heart changed by the Holy Spirit of God so as to confess Jesus as the Christ was the foundation of the church. Jesus entrusted this authority to him like what we saw with Eliakim in the first reading. Peter, as first among equals, shared this authority with the other disciples. Peter, the Rock, was the leader of the church among the Jews, the people to whom God first granted the understanding of the mystery of the church, before Paul spread the message to the Gentiles.

Peter clarified this meaning in the Book of First Peter. Peter said, "you also, as living stones, are

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

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

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

1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

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

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

47 Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: 48 he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a

house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:47-49)

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

A second significant point in the text arises from when Jesus said that He "will give you the keys of the kingdom in heaven," and that whatever he bound on earth would be bound in heaven and whatever was loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. Scripture is clear that the keys of the kingdom are salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Peter and the other apostles were being sent out with authority to preach the Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), which would be the entry point of faith. In a certain sense, they were being commissioned to open the doors of the Kingdom of God to others by their obedience in proclaiming the Good news and making disciples. We then see Peter is Acts 2:14-40 fulfilling this call by preaching a message of repentance and salvation in Jesus Christ. This is in line with Jesus' teaching when He said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Later, Jesus instructed the group of ten disciples (eleven less Thomas) gathered together in the upper room after His resurrection that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved. The keys of the Kingdom were being entrusted to this group of men who had been with Jesus in a personal way. They were going to be His hands and feet in the world from now on. And the story of the Gospel continues to penetrate lives because we are all commissioned to be his ambassadors, representing God's love and truth to the world with our lives and our proclamation of the Good news (2 Corinthians 5:20).

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

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Reflection Questions

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

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

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_08-23-2020Download

Ceci Bordayo Testimony



My Personal Testimony

Have you ever been so honest that it scared you? When I began writing my first song called "House of Secrets," I scared myself. Even though my family and I had agreed to share our story of transformation, it dawned on me, "are we revealing our dark past to everyone? Are we exposing our family's secrets to the world?" At first I thought, this topic is "too heavy." Can we turn the spotlight on family dysfunctionality and sexual abuse? A sense of vulnerability gripped my soul as I began to write the song. For so long, fake smiles had shrouded our family's dark secrets, that speaking the truth out loud felt unfamiliar. But I believe what God did in my life in the midst of my suffering shouldn't be kept a secret.

At 2lbs. 11oz. I was born fighting for my life. My identical twin won first place in our first race, beating me by one whole minute. From the moment I entered the world, I fought long and hard to survive. A month-long stay in the hospital would be the first of many battles ahead of me.

A house of secrets meant that externally, we were a picture-perfect family but internally, we were all trying to find ways to survive the trauma and abuse. My grandfather sexually abused me at the age of 7. I told my father what happened but it was of no help, as he himself was an abuser. I watched my father rape my twin sister and my younger sister would be his next victim—she was only 11 years old.

My older brother was victim of my father's death brutal physical abuse, to the point of almost taking his life. Paralyzed by fear, my mother closed the door to our suffering. Her unresolved childhood trauma kept her captive. She became numb, and lost sight of her identity and self-worth.

We were a house full of pain, lies, and abuse, all while going to the house of God. Both of my parents served as leaders in the church. I found it hard to understand God's love and purpose for my life. My image of all good and God was tainted. I would hear how good God was and how He had a purpose for each and every one of us. How could this be? How can a God who is love, who is good, allow all this pain to happen in my family?

I Chose Forgiveness

At the age of 15, I sat at youth camp and listened very intently to a preacher's sermon. I remember him saying, "if you don't forgive, you can't be free!" I wanted to be free! I wanted to feel alive! I truly wanted to experience God's goodness for myself. It would require me to start tearing down the walls I built up along the way, shutting everyone out, so they couldn't hurt me. I wanted to be done with pain—even the pain I was causing myself. By the end of that service, I asked God to help start the renovation of my mind and my heart. Right then and there, I let go and chose forgiveness.

I began journaling, journaling turned into songwriting, and songwriting gave me a voice to share my story through music. I didn't realize it then, but as I was writing, I found my healing and my purpose. I believe one person's story is someone else's hope.

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My hope in telling my story is to share with you that God never left you. He sees you. He is waiting with open arms for you the prodigal, for you the broken, for you the hopeless. He is a good God and He loves you more than you know! The hope that turned my story around was Jesus. He can turn your story around! Whatever pain, whatever experiences, no matter what kind of dysfunctional background you come from, you can change the cycle! My family is living proof, I am living proof!

Updated Web Site



We are pleased to announce some important improvements and changes to the web site.

- We have adopted a new theme and layout to make things easier to find as way as provide a new, fresher, updated look. This includes relocation of certain elements such as the most recent Mass Notes to a spot in the Quicklinks menu (available only on the desktop version).
- Adopted a new site logo which represents the central concept of this site with the narrow road leading to life through faith in Christ Jesus.
- Beginning on 12/30/2018 the Mass Notes will be published under the Christians for Christ author instead of under each particular writer. In addition a new section has been added to the web site listing biographical information about each author.
- Changes to how the sponsored ads are positioned on the site. We provide a means for sponsors in order to offset the substantial costs of providing this web ministry. The revenue from this site hardly does that, so we ask our readers to also visit our other sites which will in the future provide more substantial support. This includes the Roadside Tribute site which

> provides a means for people around the world to share images and stories of roadside memorials they have constructed to memorialize lost relatives and friends. **Visit the site at https://roadsidetribute.com** .

We are confident that these changes will help to better serve our readers.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-23-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Micah where we learn about a prediction God gave concerning the Messiah. Then we learn about Jesus' high priestly ministry in the second reading from the Book of Hebrews. We close this week's study with the Gospel reading from Luke in which Mary visits Elizabeth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of

Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events.

Today's reading opens with a summary of the former sieges possibly under the direction of either King Sennacherib (of the Syrian Empire) or Nebuchadnezzar (of Babylon), then provides an astounding prophecy about the coming ruler Jesus. Micah wrote during the reign of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Micah 1:1), some eight centuries before the birth of Jesus.

First Reading:

> *Micah 5:1-4 NAS95 1 "Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; They have laid siege against us; With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek. 2 "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." 3 Therefore He will give them up until the time When she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel. 4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth.*

Micah said that their enemies would so disparage them that even their own king would be humiliated, or "With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek" (v. 1c). Throughout their history Israel has frequently been the subject of attacks and invasions, and in this case Micah was likely referring either to an attack by the Assyrians or the Babylonians. While this prophecy came true in Micah's day they also pointed to the Messiah. Jesus was struck in the face in the time leading up to His crucifixion (John 18:22, Matthew 26:67). From there the prophet moved on to reveal more about the coming Messiah we now know as Jesus. He said, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (v. 2). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem in Israel, he differentiated between the one in the north and the one near Jerusalem in which the new King would be born. One would assume that a powerful leader would come from the capital city, Jerusalem. However, Micah's prophecy revealed that this would not be case, instead the ruler would come from the tiny insignificant town of Bethlehem. (We sing the song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," as a reminder of God's unusual way of exalting the lowliest of cities for His purposes). From this insignificant city God would bring forth a ruler who usher in spiritual deliverance from the ultimate enemy Satan. Micah brought forth the idea that the Messiah was from eternity (v. 2). This corresponds to what the Prophet Daniel said about the Messiah being the "Ancient of Days" (Daniel 7:22). He is not a created being, rather He existed in eternity past as part of the Godhead (John 1:1-2). It is difficult to understand what the prophet meant when he said, "He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child" (v. 3). It is safe to say that the Israelites were subject to a 400-year period of prophetic silence where they might have felt abandoned by God and

wondered if He would ever bring forth the promised Messiah. The prophet goes on to foretell the in-grafting of the Gentiles into the family of God by saying, "Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel" (v. 3, see Romans 11:17). Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus. During Jesus' First Advent, He came as a shepherd leader where He declared Himself to be the Good Shepherd (verse 4, John 10:11). His true leadership is yet to be realized after He returns at the end of the age "Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth" (v. 4).

It's amazing when you compare Micah's prophecy to the life of Jesus and recognize the precision of the fulfillment by Jesus. As we move towards Christmas may we be reminded of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and His coming rulership over all the earth when He comes again so that our lives reflect this reality.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Jesus fulfilled other prophecies besides what we just read in Micah. Our New Testament reading in Hebrews points out another important way that Jesus completed the requirements of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Through His perfect sacrifice, Jesus ushered in a new era of relating to God the Father. This passage helps us to see why it is necessary for us to place our faith in Jesus Who perfectly executed the will of the Father on our behalf.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 10:5-10 NAS95 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME; 6 IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE. 7 "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" 8 After saying above, "SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS AND WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, NOR HAVE YOU TAKEN PLEASURE in them" (which are offered according to the Law), 9 then He said, "BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." He takes away the first in order to establish the second. 10 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

The author of Hebrews quoted from several Old Testament passages to show how Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Law and brought an end to the need for the sacrificial system. The first Old Testament passage is from Psalm 40:6 that explains how God was fed up with their dead religion which involved ritualistic sacrifice. The Psalmist explains how the One that will come to fulfil these prophecies will perfectly obey the will of God, "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). Because Jesus perfectly fulfilled the will of God, we can be counted righteous based upon His merit (2 Corinthians 5:21). The reading closes with an important point about how Jesus took away the first covenant of the Law and brought in the second one of grace. The author said, "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ

once for all" (v. 10). We are sanctified or made holy through a one-time sacrifice that can never be repeated.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 1:39-45 NAS95 39 Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."*

When Mary arrived at her relatives' home, Elizabeth was six months pregnant even though she was advanced in age and barren up until that point (Luke 1:36). Elizabeth's greeting would have been confirmation to Mary that God was up to something and her appearance by the Angel Gabriel was not a figment of her imagination. We see a contrast in this passage regarding the response to the Angel Gabriel's messages. Zacharias had not believed Gabriel but instead had asked for a sign (Luke 1:18). Elizabeth said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Mary had immediately believed, "And blessed is she who believed" (v. 45a). She was able to encourage Mary's tender heart of belief that God could do the impossible, especially in light of the fact that she herself was pregnant with her own miracle child.

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

our favor from the Lord.

Reflection Questions

1. As Christmas is very near take a moment to conduct an inventory of thankfulness. Write down five things for which you are thankful this Christmas holiday.
2. List two major challenges that came your way during the past year. How has God helped you through your challenges this year? What Scripture verses helped you during these difficult times?

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