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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 03-29-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a vision from the Prophet Ezekiel about the future resurrection of the people of Israel. Then we move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and then conclude with the chronicle of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel Chapter 37. Here Ezekiel was given a prophecy concerning the future restoration of the Nation of Israel. This was one of a series of visions that God gave to Ezekiel the night before the messenger came to him with the news that Jerusalem had been destroyed (Ezekiel 21). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus made a tiny down payment on this promised restoration of Israel through the raising of Lazarus. As we study the text, it's important to be diligent to distinguish between God's promises to Israel versus those made to the people of God as a whole. Saint Paul explains God's future plan for Israel in Romans Chapter 11. It's also important to recognize how portions of the prophecy have already been fulfilled by the time we are reading this versus what is yet to be fulfilled – through both Israel and the Church. Though the Gentiles have been "ingrafted" into God's kingdom (Romans 11:17), they are distinct from His Chosen People the Jews. Read the text, noting that we included the first eleven verses for context, as our readers note that we are prone to doing!

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First Reading:

> *1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. 2 He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." 4 Again He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' 5 "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. 6 'I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.'" 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life."'" 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. 11 Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' 12 "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 "Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. 14 "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it," declares the LORD.'" (Ezekiel 37:1-14)*

God promised to restore the spiritually dead Israel to life through the sending of His Holy Spirit (v.14). We can say that this prophecy was at least partially fulfilled during several different events, but the final fulfillment will not happen until Daniel's fortieth Week during the end times. First, it was partially fulfilled during the times of the Old Testament when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. Second, the prophecy was partially fulfilled when Jesus Himself entered the temple (Mark 11:15). Third, the prophecy was partially fulfilled after Jesus' death and immediate entrance into heaven. We read from the Gospel of Saint Matthew:

> *51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered*

the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:51-53).

Only Saint Matthew made mention of the miraculous mini-resurrection that occurred immediately after Jesus' death. Imagine the appearance of a group of saints rising from the graves and walking about the City of God (Jerusalem)? These were not like the walking dead from the popular horror movies of our day, these were the "walking living" prophesied by the Prophet Ezekiel!

Continuing on the partial fulfillments of Ezekiel's prophesy, the fourth way in which it was fulfilled was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit of God was poured out onto the people in Acts 2:1-4. This was also the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy regarding the sending of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

Taking into consideration the whole council of Scripture, the verses in Ezekiel and all of the other verses put together indicate that not only will Israel experience a spiritual awakening in the future, they, along with all of the believers in God the Messiah, will also experience a physical resurrection. In regards to the Nation of Israel, Ezekiel indicated that God would complete His divine plan through a future restoration of a national Israel. What form this will take, and whether the current re-gathering that is already happening will mature into final embodiment of what God has predicted is unknown.

As believers, we live with the hope of this resurrection, and this was the hope of which Paul spoke in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4. There Paul said, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1Thessalonians 4:14). He continued, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (vv. 16-17). Like what the saints experienced during their physical resurrection in Jerusalem immediately after Jesus gave His life for them, we too will experience resurrection. Later in the Gospel message we will see another of the types of "first fruits" of resurrection through Jesus raising of Lazarus. Lazarus rising from the dead was different from what is promised to him and all believers because he died a second physical death (Hebrews 9:27).

The importance of the resurrection prophesied in Ezekiel is multidimensional. For one, it shows God's power over death. Humans have devised a lot of ways to defeat common enemies that prematurely take physical life, but we have yet to find a cure for death. Jesus has conquered the grave, which shows that He is powerful enough to handle all the lesser stresses that we face (Eph. 1:18-20). I sometimes joke with people that if your problems require resurrection power or less, God's got you covered. Anything above that, though, and you're out of luck. Second, the bodily resurrection of the saints allows us to live with an eternal perspective. This gives us the impetus for a counter-cultural lifestyle that is able to give ourselves away for higher purposes, because we know that this life is not all there is. Third, if we have said good-bye to loved ones in the Lord, the resurrection of the saints comforts us that death has lost its victory and sting (1 Corinthians 15:55).

We will see our loved ones again in the Lord's presence.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Chapter 8 of Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this section Paul explained how only the spiritual man can please God, "because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (vv. 7-8)." We included the first seven verses in order to provide the context.

Second Reading:

> *1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8:1-11)*

Paul encouraged the Roman believers by telling them that they are not living in the flesh since (and if) the Holy Spirit of Christ lives in them (v.9). He said that those "in the flesh," meaning those on the broad road of destruction (Matthew 7:13), cannot please God; no matter how hard they try. In contrast, since the believer is born from above (John 3:3), the Holy Spirit gives them spiritual life in the present time and in the future will give them eternal, physical life (v.11). Paul said about the latter, "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (v.11b). This is a powerful hope given to us by God. We have an eternal way of life through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The second reading dovetails very nicely into the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 11 covering the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. As we noted in the first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, Lazarus' physical resurrection is a kind of first glimpse of what will happen to all believers in the literal, physical resurrection which is coming at the end of this age. Saint Paul said the following about this in 1 Corinthians 15:

> *50 Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. (1 Corinthians 15:50-54)*

The context of the Gospel lesson was during the time of the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22). Jesus had just finished making several bold claims about his identity as God in the flesh. He said, "I and the Father are One" (v.30). Because of this statement the Pharisees once again tried to stone Him, but again he evidently hid Himself from them and "escaped from their hands" (v.39b). Next Jesus travelled to Bethabara (John 10:40, John 1:28) where many came to believe in him (John 10:42). As you read the text try to see it in light of the fact that Jesus knew that He would die at the hands of His own people (John 18:4), an event that occurred just over a week after the time He heard the news about Lazarus.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." 4 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was. 7 Then after this He *said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples *said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 This He said, and after that He *said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep." 12 The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13*

*Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. 14 So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." 16 Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him." 17 So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. 20 Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. 21 Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 "Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." 23 Jesus *said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha *said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." 28 When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. 31 Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They *said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?" 38 So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, *said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" 41 So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." 43 When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." 44 The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." 45 Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. (John 11:1-45)*

Did you notice the repeating of certain key phrases throughout the text? Verses 17 – 39 follow a literary structure known as a "chiasm" which the author used in order to focus attention to a central portion of the text. The pattern is one of repeating or contrasting ideas on either side of a central verse that indicates the main focus of the author. Here the pattern picks up in verse 17 and 39. "So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days," (v.17, emphasis added) and "Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days'" (v.39, emphasis added). A second phrase repeats in verses 21 and 32. "**Martha** then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died," (v. 21, emphasis added) and "Therefore, when **Mary** came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died'" (v.32, emphasis added). Notice that both Martha and Mary independently confirmed their belief that Jesus had the power to prevent Lazarus from dying from his sickness. The final repeating pattern is in verses 20 and 29 in which first Martha went to meet Jesus (v.21) and then Mary (v.29). The literary structure finally points to the main focus of the verses sandwiched between those containing repeating or contrasting ideas. This is found in verses 25 – 26: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"

The central passages from the chiasm above, taken with Jesus' opening statement in verse 4, illuminate the central truth in the Gospel lesson. "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, **so that the Son of God may be glorified by it**'" (v.4). And again, "Jesus said to her, '**I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"** (vv. 25-26). When Jesus said "I am" He made a powerful claim of divinity. In Chapter 10 Jesus repeated this phrase no less than five times which led to John saying, "There was again division among the Jews because of these words " (John 10:19). The bottom line is this. The purpose of Jesus' healing of Lazarus was for Jesus to glorify Himself as God (I am) because He is the only bearer of eternal life for all who believe.

Now let's look at some other details that emerge from the text. As Jesus approached the tomb, Martha warned Jesus that since Lazarus had been dead for four days there would be a stench. It's highly likely that she had either already smelled a dead body before, or possibly even smelled the odor that was coming out of Lazarus tomb. Regardless of the case, Martha showed concern for Jesus even though she desired for Him to do something about Lazarus. We don't know whether either Mary or Martha believed Jesus could (or would) physically raise Lazarus from the dead. Martha testified that she believed Ezekiel's prophesy regarding the resurrection that we saw in the first reading. She said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (v.25).

Have you ever smelled the horrible stench of death? If you have, you would understand the reason

for Martha's concern for Jesus in approaching Lazarus' tomb. I experienced the smell of death many years ago in my hometown, which is something that I have never forgotten. I remember one particular weekend when a car accident resulted in two deaths. Afterwards the fire department came and washed down the scene in an attempt to erase some of the carnage, and then the cars were towed to the local auto garage. Curiosity may have killed the cat but I just had to visit the auto garage parking lot to inspect the carnage. As I approached the crumpled up car and was still a good distance away I noticed a very strange odor. As I got closer, I smelled one of the most horrible odors that I had ever smelled in my life up to that point, and I was born on a farm with three brothers! It was so bad that I asked myself, what was I thinking by coming over here to see the wreckage? Now over 30 years later I can still remember the stench. Martha knew about this as well, that the smell of death was so bad that she needed to warn Jesus. The importance of this point for our daily lives is to remind us of Christ's power over not only the stench of death (which is very real), but also the consequences of death itself. Praise be to God!

The text said that Jesus was **deeply moved** with concern for Lazarus and his sisters. John said so twice in the text (verses 33 and 38). This story contains the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35, "Jesus wept." Of course, the verse markings were added to the Bible much later than the original writing. However, clearly John's recording of Jesus' response to his friends' Mary, Martha and Lazarus is extremely significant. If Jesus, God in the flesh, Immanuel, meaning "God with us" wept over the death of a single friend, how much more does God grieve over *our* pain, suffering and eventual death?

What happened next probably astounded them beyond words. When Jesus called to Lazarus from the tomb, he emerged alive as a living testimony to God's power over death. Evidently, many other Jews were watching and because of this miracle they too came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (v.44). What a glorious celebration they must have had. The sisters' terrible suffering turned into immense joy as Lazarus was not only brought back to life but also healed from the condition which resulted in his death in the first place.

Reflection Questions

1. The main point of the story of Lazarus' was to show this central truth that Jesus declared about Himself:

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus still declares this truth about Himself and asks the question to you. Do you believe this? If so, what difference does this make in your life? If not, what is holding you back from believing His resurrection power?

2. The second reading from Romans 8 sets up a sharp contrast between living according to the flesh or living according the Spirit. Turn back to that and **underline** the words/phrases that describe the flesh and **circle** the words/phrases that describe the Spirit. Which of these words/phrases most describe your present condition? Which words/phrases would you like to be descriptive of you? Talk to God about this desire.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 03-22-2020



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

> *eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)*

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

To summarize, in the first and second reading we discussed how God "unblinded" the minds of

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the physical condition of the blind man was as a result of the man or his parent's sin. Jesus corrected this false

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

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

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

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

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

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to

show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter let's all us pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that can come only through the good news of the Gospel and believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday

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03-15-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of Exodus where we will see Moses follow God's instruction to bring water from a rock. Then we move to Romans Chapter 5 where we will discover Saint Paul's explanation of how Christians are justified by faith alone. Then we study an amazing encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus Chapter 17. The context of the passage was a few months after Moses guided the Hebrew nation out of Egypt where they had been subject to slavery for 400 years after Joseph's reign with the Pharaoh. God had provided them with manna some months earlier (Exodus 16:14). They had just left the Wilderness of Sin and had camped at a place called Rephidim after camping at other places along the way. This was right before the Amalekites attacked the defenseless Hebrews at that location (Exodus 17:8-16). We included the first two verses in order to add context for you while you read.

First Reading:

> *1 Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. 2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the*

> *LORD?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." 5 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:1-7)*

Moses said that the congregation of Israel journeyed "by stages," meaning that they made other stops along the way. Numbers Chapter 33 said that they made three stops between the Wilderness of Sin and Rephidim (Numbers 33:12-14) indicating that these in between campsites may have been less eventful than what happened here. Here Moses encountered serious opposition, to the point that he was concerned that if the conflict wasn't resolved the people would stone him (v.4c). It was so significant that Moses even named the place Massah and Meribah after the conflict (v.7), words which mean

"testing" and "contending." The people commanded Moses to give them water for them to drink along with their animals (vv. 2-3). The significant point is that rather than pray to God themselves to ask for water, the people "quarreled" with Moses, who was their obvious intercessor between them and God (v.2). Moses asked the question, "Why do you test the LORD?" (v. 2e). A clue to what the people meant by this can be found in verse 7: "He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us, or not?'" What happened was that they doubted that God was still watching over them to provide for them. This is amazing because God had just delivered them from the army of the Egyptians just a few months earlier, and was guiding them in their journeys through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21)! How soon they forgot about God's divine deliverance of them from their slavery in Egypt, His supernatural parting of the Red Sea and His subsequent visible leadership on their journey!

As the story continued, Moses interceded in prayer on behalf of the people, something that he did very frequently as Moses was one of the most prayerful people in the Bible. Moses' prayer was something which shouldn't be taken for granted, as he evidently prayed so hard and so long for the people in the subsequent battle against the Amalekites that men had to hold his arms up (Exodus 17:12). God could have just provided water immediately upon Moses' request, but instead He

answered Moses' prayer in a way that revealed Moses' authority as a leader of the people along with the elders.

The truth that emerges from the text is that everyone has access to God's miraculous provision through prayer without the need for an intercessor. Moses was their intercessor between them and God, and theologically was what is called a "type of Christ" meaning that he was a person that prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ. As believers in the risen Lord Jesus, we have direct access to God's miraculous powers through prayer, and our Intercessor lives in our hearts through God the Holy Spirit. When we face difficult challenges in life, God calls us to turn to Him in prayer, as well as to ask others to pray on our behalf, as Moses did for the Hebrew Nation. The Hebrew people turned to Moses to pray for them instead of the God that they could see in the pillars. God calls us to turn to the God that we can't see. James said in the New Testament Book by his name, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). The Book of Hebrews says, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). The Apostle John in 1 John 5 said the following:

> *13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. (1 John 5:13-15)*

We can rest in the fact that God receives our prayers *faster* than the speed of light. Although we don't always agree with the outcome or the timing of God's answer, we can have peace that God works on our behalf for our own good (Romans 8:28) regardless of our feelings.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Chapter 5 in the Book of Romans. In the previous chapter, Paul explained the case that God justifies sinners on the basis of their faith in Jesus alone, and challenged the false notion in the Roman church that although believers receive salvation by grace alone they preserve it by their good works.

Read the text, noting that additional verses were added for context.

Second Reading:

> *1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven*

> *character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. 6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-8)*

Paul started out by connecting this section of teaching with his previous teaching about justification by faith. "Therefore, having been justified by faith" (v. 1a). He said that believers have a new relationship with God, one of peace, through the Lord Jesus Christ. He went on to say that believers have hope in seeing the glory of God and that they can persevere during their trials because this produces godly character which in turn produces hope (vv. 3-4). Finally, Paul made an amazing statement about how Jesus died for us while we were still in our sinful state. He said, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" v.6). He continued, "***But God*** demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (v.8, emphasis added). Notice the phrase "But God." God's direct involvement in the affairs of our lives greatly reassures us of the reality of His love for us! God loved us so much that he gave his only begotten Son for us (John 3:16). He did this with the full awareness of the *future* sins that we would commit, yet He went through with a humiliating death on the cross for us anyway. As we approach Good Friday, think about the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for us. Moses left a heavenly palace in the court of the Pharaoh in order to deliver the Hebrew slaves from bondage, so that they might find rest in the Promised Land. Jesus left the realities of Heaven in order to deliver us from the bondage of our sin, so that we might find rest in His eternal home, our Promised Land. May we continue to appreciate and adore our Savior for what He did for us!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading covers a story of Jesus freeing a woman of the bondage of sin. While we may or may not be able to relate to her particular sin struggle (sexual immorality), we can all relate to the problem of looking for love in all the wrong places.

Gospel Reading:

> *5 So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; 6 and Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. 7 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to*

buy food. 9 Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." 11 She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? 12 "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?" 13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." 16 He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." 17 The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." 19 The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. 20 "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He." 27 At this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why do You speak with her?" 28 So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" 30 They went out of the city, and were coming to Him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. 35 "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. 36 Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. 37 For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." 39 From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. 41 Many more believed because of His word; 42 and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we

> *have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world." (John 4:5-42)*

Some key observations from the text include:

- This story of misunderstandings shows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world
- He shows Himself to those who are seeking to worship God in spirit and in truth (not just to the religious elite)
- While she is seeking validation and significance through temporal realities (water, wells, religious argumentation, human relationships), Jesus is wanting to open her heart up to eternal realities (living water that will truly satisfy her soul, a life that is regenerated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, a life that is not afraid of the truth).
- Jesus loves her enough to break through her misguided notions of where life comes from and helps her to see that He is the Messiah, the anointed Deliverer, to save people from their sins.
- As a result of her changed life, others see the reality of Jesus and believe in Him as their own Savior.

What about you? Are you thirsty?

It's easy to look with judgment on this poor Samaritan woman, who was looking for love in all the wrong places. She bumps into Jesus one day and gets a whole new lesson on her need for a Savior. But as Christians, we can grow cold to our need for a Savior. But, if we're honest, we have our own broken cisterns that don't satisfy our deep thirst:

- Finding approval from others
- Achieving goals and accomplishing things
- Perfectionism
- Religiosity
- Looking to others for our sense of identity and validation

It's easy to do what this woman did and argue about places and forms of worship, to punt to mystery, to look for love in all the wrong places.

What religious conundrums do you throw into Jesus' face when he is trying to deal with spiritual life issues? What strategies do you use to deflect the painful sense of thirst that gnaws at your soul?

He is patient and keeps pressing us to come out of hiding and be honest: to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. But what does it look like to drink this living water, to become true worshipers?

It looks like a relationship with Jesus. Do you have this? Are you pursuing Him? Are you letting Him love you, speak to you, fill you and change you?

Reflection Questions

1. One of the common themes for this week's reading has to do with being delivered from the bondage of sin. In what ways does sin feel like slavery or bondage? How does Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well reassure you that he is powerful enough to free you from the bondage and penalty of sin? How would you respond if He offered you living water?
2. How are you like the Hebrew people? Re-read the 1 Cor. 11 passage and take a personal inventory. How can this story be instructive to you in your life? Ask yourself who in your circle of believing friends and relatives prays for you on a regular basis. Ask yourself for whom you have been praying recently.

   Second, reach out to one other believer this week with a specific prayer request and ask them to pray regarding this one specific issue throughout the week. Finally, ask the person with whom you communicated how you may pray for them in one specific way this week.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 03-08-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we return to Genesis, the first Book in the Bible to see God's unconditional promise of blessing on Abram, whose name God later changed to the more familiar Abraham. Then we will study Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy and conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 17 in which we will see Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.

Let's step back for a moment and talk about how we go about studying the readings each week in order to give you some insights into our method. When we study the readings, we use the following procedure counting down from the letter "C" in the alphabet: **C**ontext, **B**ig Idea, and **A**pplication. First, we examine the **context** of the passage in light of the surrounding passages (the textual context) along with the historical information (the historical context). Second, we determine the theological **big idea** that emerged from the study of the text. What was God saying to the people in the original context, and what theological principles can we extract from the text? Finally, we determine the contemporary **application(s)** – what does it mean to us today? As we move through the readings each week try and see what theological big ideas you can garner from the text and how these could then be applied to your life. As you focus upon the **A**pplication, first pray that God would reveal to you what He would have you do with what you learned. You may be amazed at how God sheds light differently on each passage as you encounter and study it again in the liturgical cycle over the years. Perhaps you will find, as my wife likes to say, that you have been ruined for the ordinary!

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Genesis Chapter 12. The context of this section was just after Abram, who

later became Abraham the Father of all believers, left with his father Terah from his birthplace in the region called "Ur of the Chaldeans" and settled in Haran (Genesis 11:31). These were the circumstances leading up to God's call of Abram. Looking at the bigger picture, Noah's Flood was in the somewhat distant history, and he had died back in Chapter 9 (v. 28). The era of the city building had begun under Nimrod (10:8), beginning with the city of Babel (10:10). Chapter 10 contained what was called the "Table of Nations" that represented the nations that developed after Noah and his sons departed from the ark. "These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood" (v. 32, emphasis added). The division (or "separated in some versions) happened at the Tower of Babel where God acted to confuse the languages of the nation states for several reasons including their idolatry and unwillingness to spread out and populate the earth (9:1, 11:4). "They said, 'Come, let **us** build for **ourselves** a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let **us** make for **ourselves** a name, otherwise **we** will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4, emphasis added). Many Bible commentators agree that the tower spoken of in verse 12 was a "ziggurat," which was a tall structure associated with the worship of pagan deities. Notice that the focus of the people's efforts was upon themselves (see the five bolded words in the text), rather than upon God's commandment to spread out and populate the earth. As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, they were not setting their mind on God's interests, but on man's, something which Jesus called Satanic (Matthew 16:23). We must remember that God cautions us against building shrines, regardless of the purity of our intentions. Otherwise these shrines, or towers, ziggurats, may become stumbling stones in serving God.

With this context in mind let's read the text. Note that as you read about God's promises to Abram, who was later renamed "Abraham," see if you can uncover the theological **b**ig ideas in the text.

First Reading:

> *1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." 4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4 NAS95)*

This account is the first recorded encounter of God's call to Abram, which was a call to bless him. We don't know how the LORD communicated with Abram, but it seems very clear that Abram

understood and immediately obeyed (v. 4). While this call would be one of blessing, it required some sacrifice on Abram's part. He had to leave his country, his relatives and his father's house. The progression goes from more general to very specific. God did not give him the GPS coordinates of the destination; He just told him that He would show Abram the land when he got there. How's that for literally walking by faith? That is why Abram is called the father of faith, since he had the unique privilege of becoming the father of a great nation that was called to walk by faith in God, as a unique light and blessing to the other nations on earth. God's blessing included not only making him into a great nation, but also making Abram's name great. The promise was that Abram would be a blessing to other people groups.

In verses 2 – 3 we see an unconditional blessing of Abraham and all of the future Jews as well. "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Notice the warning that God gave to those who won't bless the Jews. "And the one who curses you I will curse" (v.3b). It's impossible to understand all of the implications of this timeless principle. Although we may not understand how God will deal with those who have harmed the Jews, we can rest assured that God will hold true to His unconditional promises to both bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse them.

God called Abram to make a great sacrifice in leaving his country, his relatives and his father's house. Is God calling you to leave some area of comfort to you? Is it possible that we are drawing our personal identity from our country, our relatives or our father's house? Whatever the case may be, God calls each of us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Romans 4:3 says that Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So this text helps us to understand what pleases God's heart. Our belief in who He says He is and our willingness to walk by faith is what God is looking for in each of our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move into the second reading, ponder for a moment how God speaks to us in the present day in order to call us to take certain actions for Him. In the first reading God spoke to Abram through a clear and specific call. The author of the Book of Hebrews provided some insights into how God spoke in the past and how He speaks to us today. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's final method of communication to His people is through the words and life of His Son Jesus. As you read from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy notice how throughout this letter, and in all of his letters, Paul's central focus in on the good news of Jesus – the Gospel.

Second Reading:

> *8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, 10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (2 Timothy 1:8-10)*

Paul reminded us not be ashamed of suffering for the good news of the Gospel, Jesus' eternal ministry, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). God saved us not because of our works, said Paul, but for His divine purposes (Titus 3:5). This reminds us of Paul's teaching to the Ephesians. "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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). We can celebrate that when we believe in God's promises through Jesus, we have obtained immortality (v. 10b). In the same way that Abram listened to God, we are to listen to Him through the Gospel. You can see why Paul was not ashamed of this good news! We, as well, can learn from Paul's example. Even though the world around us wants us to feel timid about our faith, we of all people can be assured that the free gift of eternal life is something to be excited about. There are people in your life who need to hear this good news, not only from your words, but from your transformed life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate actions. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v.21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v. 222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v.23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

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Gospel Reading:

> *1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).*

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John 18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence in the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry with the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centered around the Father's message to Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the Father said, "**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!** (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

"Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to have responded in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we should proceed. As I moved onto the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong; I was only trying to help? What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and to listen.

My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded to Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v.5c). Peter, though well intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the love of the Father for Him (which by the way is the same love Jesus has for us based on John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own three-point plan.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is God calling you to walk by faith? How are the examples of Abram and Paul helpful to you?
2. Does the fact that salvation comes by grace and not by works sound like good news to you? When we accept this free gift from God, we are exercising faith. How is faith necessary for salvation to be imparted to us? How are you exercising faith in God's grace and not putting your faith in your own good works to bring you eternal life?
3. Jesus' true identity as God was revealed at the transfiguration. His face was radiant, shining like the sun. How can a vision of Jesus' true identity spur you on in your everyday life? What would need to change in your life in order to obey God's voice and "listen to Him"?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 03-01-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Notes. This week we will examine the creation of man in the Book of Genesis and then the fall of humankind into sin through the temptation of the devil that brought about God's curse upon the earth. Then in the second reading, we will examine God's plan of redemption that He brought about by sending Jesus to die for our sins. Finally, we will study in the Gospel lesson how Jesus successfully resisted the temptation of the devil. Our lesson this week followed a lengthy study last week on the subject of worry. If you haven't read that we suggest you find time to review it on the web site.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Genesis and covers the sections of creation and the fall of humanity. This text together with the second reading from Romans constitutes the great bookends of human history. On one hand, Genesis records the creation of the universe including the earth, animal kingdom, and humankind. This is closely followed by the ugly record of the day when man sinned against God, which invoked His curse upon the world. On the other hand, the Book of Romans that we will see in the second reading, records in detail God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. This is a critically important study this week because we will cover a summary of all of human history, which can be summed up in just four short words: creation, fall, redemption, and glory.

As we move to the first reading let me point out some helpful context since the reading skipped the ending of Chapter 2 in Genesis. The context of the reading from Genesis is that it occurred just after

the point at which God created Adam and before He made Eve, the first woman, though she wasn't officially named until Chapter 3 (Genesis 3:20). Chapter 1 recorded the record of the entire creation, including man. Chapter 2 expands on the creation account by filling in additional details. In the opening of Chapter two God had finished his creation of the universe and had placed Adam on earth in the Garden of Eden with the commandment to cultivate it (Genesis 2:15). He provided clear direction to Adam by saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (2:16b – 17). Subsequently, God formed the entirety of the animal kingdom and appointed Adam with the task of naming every animal and bird (v. 19). The creation story continues:

20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:20-25).

At this point in history man was in the perfect company of God, had the perfect wife named Eve, tilled a perfect garden with unlimited food, and walked around perfectly naked all day. What more could anyone ask for? However, it was just too good to last. Think back to the single commandment that God gave to Adam. He said not to eat of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" (v.17). It is easy to look back on Adam and wonder why if he had so much, he had to concentrate upon the one thing that he couldn't have. But, don't we do the very same thing? If we know that the speed limit is 55, why do we feel the need to drive 60 or 70? Just the fact that we have a law almost compels us to break it. Our consideration of whether or not we will break a law is generally tied to the penalty for failing to obey the law. A speed limit law is one thing, but God told Adam that if he broke this one certain law that the penalty would be death (v. 17). Adam had no frame of reference for the devastating effects of death upon his life here on earth.

Now, with this context in mind, let's jump back to verse seven where the first reading begins. As you read, notice the mention of another special tree growing in the Garden.

First Reading:

2:7 Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. 8 The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. 9 Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; 3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" 4 The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! 5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. (Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7)

With the job of creation completed God placed man in the Garden of Eden with trees that were already fully grown (3:6). Adam's wife was then confronted by a talking serpent, which probably wasn't too unusual to her because of her complete lack of history – everything would have been new to her. The first thing the talking serpent told her was to question the word of God. "Indeed, **has** God said?" spoke the serpent to the woman (3:1). The woman restated the warning from God, but added a prohibition about touching the tree, something which wasn't recorded in the warning given to Adam. The text doesn't say whether Adam told his wife not to touch the tree as a protective measure, or whether Eve added to God's prohibition not to eat from the tree. Regardless, had she not touched the tree this whole affair wouldn't have played out the way it did, at least not at this stage of history. [It's almost a foregone conclusion that the Fall was going to happen, it was just a matter of time.]

Next, the serpent tempted the woman a second time by once again casting doubt about the word of God. He said, "You surely will not die! 5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (v. 6). There is a nugget of truth in what the serpent said, as is usually the case, since he was a master deceiver and he evidently understood that the woman wouldn't believe an outright lie. What we mean by saying that there was some truth in the statement about not dying is that after both Adam and Eve sinned, they did not die physically (3:7), but they certainly did die spiritually. God defines death as separation from Him, which is what happened in their disobedience (Ephesians 4:17-18). God just delayed Adam's physical death for some 930 years. "So all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died" (Genesis 5:5). We are not told when Eve died. The second element of truth in the serpent's subterfuge was that their eyes *were* opened, as was told clearly in the text (3:7a).

The sin that Eve committed was great, but she at least had the excuse that she was deceived by the serpent. Adam, however, could not plead that the devil made him do it. No, the text said, "she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (v. 6e). Adam sinned without having the excuse that he

was deceived, he sinned with his eyes wide open, and willfully disobeyed God's law regarding not eating from the tree. God held Adam responsible for his sin and the subsequent curse that He poured out onto His perfect creation, something that must have grieved our Lord to no end. Adam was created first and was appointed as the leader for stewardship of God's creation, including the woman. Eve was created as the helper (2:18). If we look forward in Chapter 3, we will see that God questioned Adam first about what happened in the Garden. "Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (3:9). In the New Testament God verified that He held Adam responsible for the sin, even though Eve sinned first. We will read about this when we study the second reading from Romans Chapter 5.

The other special tree in the garden was the "tree of life" (v. 9b). It's important to note that although Adam did eat from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" he didn't eat from the tree of life. Had he done so he would have remained in his fallen state in the cursed creation forever. God said later in Chapter 3, "Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'" (3:22). Instead, what happened was that Adam ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and as a result, his eyes *were* opened (v.7), just as the devil had said they would be (v.4), such that he knew both good and evil. He knew about goodness before he sinned, and after his sin he found out about evil.

The fall of humanity that we read about in the first reading had a gigantic impact upon the world, both on the creation itself, humankind and also the animal world. Just ask anyone that has raised a two-year-old. Although I haven't had that privilege, I do have a story about how the fall has affected even the animal kingdom. My family used to have a golden retriever named Rusty. I remember our beloved dog very well as both of us used to like to go running together. Whenever I went jogging around the country roads in the neighborhood, Rusty used to like to come along with me. He used to run in front of me and then would frequently cross into the woods to follow whatever animal scent he could find there. Rusty just loved running around the woods in the neighborhood. I remember that when Rusty was young he would follow me outside thinking that I was going to take him running. Rusty would then take off down the road and I would call him back. There was an awkward moment when I would call to him while he decided whether or not he was going to obey. He turned his body away from me but looked back towards me while he made up his mind. Frequently he would think it about it for maybe a half a minute while I continued calling, then he would take off running away from me down the road. What a little stinker. He knew that he was being bad, but he ran away anyway. This sin wasn't something that we taught him; it was instinctive. The corrupted state of this world frustrates all of us in every layer of life.

The fall of humanity resulted in God's pronouncement of a curse upon His creation. This curse affected men's relationship with women (Genesis 3:15), men and women's relationship with their work (Genesis 3:19), and the ground itself (Genesis 3:17-18). God predicted the ultimate physical death for Adam. "By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because

from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

We need to let the depth of the bad news provide a backdrop to the message of hope delivered in the second reading. God sent the Second Adam to redeem mankind from their sin, which is a gift freely given to those who believe God has provided His righteousness through faith. This reading is from Saint's Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context of the reading is that Paul had just explained the crucial concept of justification by faith. "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). The word "therefore" is present to provide a linkage to what Paul discussed in the previous chapter. Here Paul explained how Father Abraham's faith was the reason that he was found righteous before the Lord, not his good works. Paul said, "For what does the Scripture say? ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Romans 4:3, the capital letters in this NASB version indicates a quotation from the Old Testament). Abraham's good works were laudable, but they didn't merit his salvation from the curse of Adam's sin. Paul said, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (4:2).

As you read the second reading from Romans 5 you will recognize the story we read about in the Garden of Eden.

Second Reading:

12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned– 13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. 16 The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. 17 For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. 18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12-19)

Paul said a mouthful in this text, enough that entire books could be written on just one of these verses alone. Here are some of the key points that arise from the reading.

- Salvation, meaning forgiveness of the penalty of sin, is provided as a free gift (v. 15) only through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
- God held Adam ("one man"), not Eve, accountable for the Fall of Mankind (v.12). All people from Adam onwards are sinners (v.14), except for Jesus (v.18).
- Though everyone even before the Jewish Law was a sinner, those before the Law couldn't be held accountable for the Law which hadn't yet been given (v.13). Nevertheless, humans are accountable to God for the laws that are written on their heart. Paul said, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Romans 2:14-15).
- The sinful state of Adam was imparted to all of humankind from that moment forward. "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (v.19a).
- Death didn't exist before the Fall and came into the world only after sin (v.12b). This negates the possibility of theistic evolution to explain God's creative process as any form of evolution requires a cycle of death.
- Jesus' sacrificial death resulted in the imputed righteousness of believers, the "gift of righteousness" (v.16, 18).

These foundational insights give us a sense of hope in our day to day lives, if we have turned to Jesus as our righteousness. We no longer have to pay the penalty for our own sins, but we are declared righteous by God if we will live under His provision of grace. The idea of grace is unmerited favor, which means we have been given a gift. A gift that has been given, needs to be received if it is to be useful to the recipient. Have you opened the gift of God's grace in your life by trusting in Jesus Christ as your only source of salvation?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson from today is from Matthew Chapter 4. As we read in the first reading, Adam and Eve were tempted by the devil and succumbed to his temptation that resulted in the Fall of Humanity. In the Gospel reading we will see how Jesus was also tempted by the devil and how he persisted in his obedience to God the Father. As you read pay special attention to how Jesus dealt with the temptation of the devil, and how this contrasted with how Eve interacted with him.

Gospel Reading:

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." 4 But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'" 5 Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had

Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU'; and 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'" 8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; 9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" 11 Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

We saw that Jesus dealt with the devil's temptation by quoting from the word of God. Notice in the NASB version how easily it is to spot the quotations from the Old Testament since they are shown in all capital letters. Three times the devil tempted Jesus, and three times Jesus resisted while quoting from the word of His Father.

The temptation for Jesus was to get His rightful place of rulership without having to go through the cross. In some ways, all of our temptations have this sense of shortcutting the process in order to attain the glory without the upfront cost. What the devil doesn't tell people is the price tag, which will be paid in full by the person who purchases his shortcut. Jesus saw through his scheme and was not pushed around by the devil's slick talk or even deceived by the twisting of Scripture. By standing in the midst of temptation, Jesus becomes our strong advocate in our own times of temptation. Hebrews 2:18 says, "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." He wants us to call on Him and to ask Him for help. Let's take Him at His word.

How should we go about resisting temptation? Saint Paul provided us with some guidance, and along with what we learned from the readings it should be obvious that we too need to rely upon the word of God to deliver us from temptation. Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1Corinthians 10:13). In times of temptation, instead of looking for a loophole, look for the way of escape!

Reflection Questions

This week had a lot of powerful concepts for us to consider in our daily lives. Here are some questions to prompt further reflection:

1. Compare the two temptation accounts again and list the ways that Jesus dealt differently than Adam and Eve. What do you learn from His example?

2. The bookends of history are encompassed in this week's reading, starting with the bad news (sin's price tag is death) and moving to the good news (Jesus' payment for our sin). If you were to analyze where you are at today in your relationship with God, where would you place yourself on the continuum of living in your sin verses living in God's grace?

   (Living in my sin —- Living in God's grace)



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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 02-23-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Notes. This week we read from the Book of Leviticus, continue our study in First Corinthians and finally conclude with further study from the Sermon on the Mount from Saint Matthew. There we will see a message that Jesus gave his disciples which culminated with a statement to them that they were to be perfect. How can anyone be perfect you may ask? We will address that and other things in the Mass Notes this week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

In the first reading this week, it's important for us to put our Old Testament hats back on and return to the culture of ancient Judaism. The first reading this week is from Leviticus Chapter 19. The Book of Leviticus is concerned with God's giving of the Law to Moses, and especially the ecclesiastical Law concerning sacrifices, offerings, and dietary Law. One of the overall purposes of the Law was to set the Hebrew people apart from the surrounding people. God said in the previous chapter, "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'I am the LORD your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes" (Leviticus 18:2-3). However, the most significant purpose of the Law was to point people to the perfect sacrifice that would occur through the Lamb of God (Jesus) who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Let's pick up with the reading today in Chapter 19.

First Reading:

> *1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. 17 You shall not hate your*

> *fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.'" (Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18)*

Several points arise from the reading. First, we see that God called the Hebrew Nation to be holy or set apart from sin and dedicated to the service of the LORD. Although we have all used and heard the word "holy" lots of times in our lives it's easy to gloss over the rich meaning of the word. In the reading God provided a simple reason why the Jews were to be holy when He said, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (v.2b). This was God's appeal to His nature and a calling for the Hebrew nation to emulate his character. As we said above, one reason that God provided the Law was to set apart the Nation of Israel from the surrounding people. The word holy means to be set apart and the Jews were called to be a peculiar people, different from the idolaters in the pagan cultures that surrounded them. They were to be holy because they were God's chosen people and were to reflect His image of holiness to the world around them. As we saw two weeks ago in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, the concept of being "set apart" was to fulfil special purposes for God, not to live an ordinary existence. The Jews were set apart for the purpose to be salt and light to those around them.

Second, God set a high standard of love for one's neighbor. This standard would have been foreign to the people from the nations surrounding Israel. The Jews, and by application all believers including us, were not to hate our neighbor in their mind (v.17a), but were instead called to love their neighbors as themselves (v.18c), and were not to take vengeance against them (v.18a). He didn't mean that we had to just love our literal neighbors, but everyone. God set this high standard of loving behavior in stone, in the Law of the land for the Hebrew people. Which of us hasn't hated our neighbor at one time or another?

Third, God said that the Jews were not to take vengeance against their neighbors. This wasn't directed to soldiers in battle because God provided clear direction to the Jews regarding those matters (see for example Deuteronomy 2:34, 3:6, and especially Deuteronomy 20:16-18). This was directed to all of God's people who were given these specific examples of how to live out one's life in a status as "set apart." Saint Paul confirmed that the admonition against taking retribution in Romans and quoted the exact verse from Leviticus. "'Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Although we may feel like we want to get even with someone for hurting us, God has given us a universal calling not to act against a "neighbor" that has wronged us.

Back when I lived in a suburb in a large Midwestern city, I developed a strong dislike for the

neighbor whose back yard adjoined the back of my own house. This neighbor had a dog that they used to let outside to do his business. This dog would then bark endlessly until the neighbor let him back inside. Their barking dog used to drive me crazy. As a result, I developed a strong dislike them, and I didn't even know them. One day out of the blue, I came up with a novel approach to solve the problem. The next time he let the dog out to bark (I mean to let him do his business!) I walked over to the fence and called to the dog, "here boy." I kept calling and sure enough, the dog came running over to the fence, jumped up wanted to be petted. I made friends with the dog that day and as a result found that I no longer disliked my neighbor either! In fact, after I moved away, I actually missed my doggy friend. Why did it take me so many years to figure that out? This was a case where love did truly conquer the conflict with my neighbor. Now if I could just make friends with my current neighbor's dog!

How about you? Do you have some difficult people in your life to whom God is calling you to love, even though you don't have feelings of love for them? If you are His child, He will give you the ability to grow in loving even your enemies. Pray to God and ask Him to change your heart.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading this week is a continuation of the study from last week in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In this reading, Saint Paul explains the concept of personal holiness. As you read try to imagine the sense that a First Century Jew would have had when Paul mentioned the phrase "temple of God" and how that would flavor their reading of this text.

Second Reading:

> *16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. 18 Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; 20 and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." 21 So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, 23 and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Corinthians 3:16-23)*

For a First Century Jew the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest and most sacred place on earth. We

know from Jesus' ministry to the Jews that they had a difficult time understanding how the human body could be a temple (John 2:19). This was especially true not only because of the grandeur of the temple but also because the whole Jewish religious system revolved around the temple. But when Jesus ushered in the church age He fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel. "And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). Our bodies are a holy temple, or shrine. Later in the same Letter Paul said, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"(1 Corinthians 6:19). We are called to be holy because our bodies are a living temple of God.

In the next section, Paul prescribed humility for healing the divisions that existed in the Corinthian Church. What Paul is saying is that a person must be humble in order to learn. Paul quoted from Job Chapter 5 and Psalm 94 to make his point. Verse 10 that he quoted from Psalm 94 was sandwiched between two verses that dealt with chastening. "*10 He who **chastens** the nations, will He not rebuke, Even He who teaches man knowledge? 11 The LORD knows the thoughts of man, That they are a mere breath. 12 Blessed is the man whom You **chasten**, O LORD, And whom You teach out of Your law*" (Psalms 94:10-12). Chastening can be God's way to bring us to a humble position. One of Paul's intents was to bring the chastening of the Lord to bear on the sin of division in the Corinthian church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

I want to include a story that will help you to understand holiness in light of biblical teachings so that you can better understand Jesus' words in the Gospel reading. One night I was attending a dinner party at a friend's house in a nearby city. After dinner, we were sitting around talking and the doorbell rang. My friend left to answer the door and then suddenly called out, "Jim, it's for you!" Thoughts raced through my mind, who even knew that I was there, who could it be that wanted me while I was visiting someone else's house? I left the dining room and walked over to the front door only to be met by two young Mormon missionaries. These were of course not unique and matched the "cookie cutter" pattern with their nametags and backpacks. This was going to be an interesting night! After I introduced myself to the men, I prayed silently and asked God for the approach that I should take in order to introduce these boys to the *true* Gospel. As it turned out I had just completed a study of Mormon doctrine and it came to me that I should discuss the doctrine of perfection with them. I just so happened to have a Bible with me in my jacket and I asked them if they were familiar with Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. I don't remember their answer, but I pulled out my Bible and asked them if they had time for a little Bible study because "You do believe in the Bible, don't you?" Next, I asked them, "How good do you have to be to make it to heaven?"

They said something like, "We strive to be perfect." They were very nice boys, just a bit misguided.

I said that that was good because "Did you know that under the biblical Law Jesus taught that in

order to be saved by being a good person you have to be perfect?" I opened the Bible to Matthew Chapter 5 and read, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). I asked them what was their standard of perfection, just how good did they have to be to make it to heaven, and how would they know when they had reached this standard? They weren't sure about that but said that they just had to keep on trying. The debate continued and I was able to show them God's true plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and not by good works. I explained to them how God emphasized the value of our good works, but that good works were not meritorious for salvation. I read to them Saint Paul's capstone statement on the matter:

> *8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)*

Paul's statement about the only way that people are saved (v.8a) is quite different from what is taught by the Mormon "church" that believes that they are saved by grace, but only *after all they can do*. This addendum is noticeably missing from the Word of God. Since salvation is a free gift from God that is obtained *only* through faith in the Lord Jesus, we don't have to strive to be perfect in order to earn our salvation. Paul explained that the reason that God saved us was for the purpose of our good works. He didn't say that we were saved because of our good works. Although Christians are called to live holy lives through God's power a good Mormon is expected to triumph over sin in their own power, and this in order to earn their salvation. We can rejoice in the victory that God has given us over such a false belief system.

With these things in mind let's read the Gospel text.

Gospel Reading:

> *You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' 39 But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. 41 Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. 43 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)*

The opening quotation was from Exodus 21:24. As an interesting side note, this quotation in Exodus followed the warning from God about neglecting to honor your parents. The Jewish Law said, "He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 21:17). Even though Jesus came to fulfill the Jewish Law, and under the New Covenant the civil and ceremonial Law are no longer binding upon Christians, the principles found in the *moral* Law are behaviors which are upheld in the New Testament. This includes honoring our parents (Ephesians 6:2), though the penalty for disobeying this law is no longer the death penalty. Notice the word "but," a transitory (conjunction) term. Jesus said in effect, "The Law prescribed this (you have heard it said), *but* I say do that." Jesus wasn't contradicting the Law but was instead calling His followers to obey a standard *higher* than the Law. We will see that this calling wasn't limited just to the Jewish Law, but to the laws of their entire society.

Jesus also called His followers to recognize a higher standard than their religious Law found in the Pentateuch (the first five Books of the Bible). His called extended to the Roman Civil law as well. This fact came out in verse 41 when Jesus spoke about being forced to go one mile. The First Century Jews were living under Roman occupation and as a result were under certain laws falling under the category of "impressment." Although they weren't under a requirement by the Romans to serve in a military function (conscription) they were required in certain circumstances to assist the Roman military. This could include being required to carry a Roman soldier's backpack 1,000 paces (a Roman mile). Jesus' outrageous call was to show the Roman soldiers generosity by going beyond the legal requirement. This principle of "going beyond the law" runs throughout today's Gospel reading.

Next, Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19, the text that we studied in the first reading. He said that you should love your neighbor (v.43) but go beyond this and love your enemies and those who persecute you (v.44). Jesus' mention of "enemies and those who persecute you" could be an allusion to the Romans and the impressment laws. The Romans were the enemies of the Jews, which was a condition that came to a head with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, then again in AD 132.

Who are the "Romans" in your life? How might you go beyond obligation and actually go the extra mile?

The culmination of Jesus' radical call to go beyond the requirements of the law to perfection was found in verse 48. Take careful note of the adverb "therefore," and ask yourself "what is it there for?" This word is "there for" because it linked Jesus call to a radical new behavior to the source of the empowerment for His people to achieve it. Jesus said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your

heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). I asked the Mormon missionaries, how can anyone, even Jesus' own disciples be perfect? If we look further ahead in the Sermon on the Mount to Matthew Chapter 6, it seems apparent that by this point in Jesus' message the crowds had begun to rejoin Him and were hearing His message. This is evident because of the way the tone changed when He introduced practices that were typical of the Pharisees in 6:1-2. He said to "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them" (6:1a) and "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets" (6:2a-b). Although Jesus' disciples may have had difficulties in controlling their personal behavior (as we do), they certainly didn't warrant Jesus' label of "hypocrites." No, Jesus reserved this label for His nemesis, the group known as the Pharisees. Now, with this context in mind let's read verse 48 in Chapter 5 again. How does Jesus love His "enemies" the Pharisees? Jesus said to the Pharisees and His disciples who were also listening, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The Pharisees were hypocrites and many evidently thought that they were already perfect through their strident observance of the Law (Matthew 23:5-7). The Scripture clearly states that nobody can be made perfect under the Law, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). What the Pharisees didn't understand was that perfection was only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul said, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2Corinthians 5:21). Jesus provided the Holy Spirit to live within us as the source of our *spiritual* perfection. This spiritual perfection manifests itself in our radical obedience to God in going above the prescription of the eternal moral laws and the prevailing civil laws of our society. It's not that we won't ever sin but that our ongoing intention is to accomplish the work of God by being salt and light even to our enemies, the "Roman soldiers" in our community.

In summary, as Christians Scripture calls us to go beyond the law. Christians are called not only to observe the civil law (Romans 13:1-3) but to follow a standard above this body of law as well as a higher standard than the moral law that God has written on our hearts (Romans 2:15). God has provided us with His empowerment to follow this higher standard through the gift of the Holy Spirit Who is given to every believer who obeys (Acts 5:32). "*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. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we said that as believers our spiritual perfection manifests itself in radical obedience to God in going above the prescription of the eternal moral laws and the prevailing civil laws of our society. Answer the following questions.

A. Who are the "Roman soldiers" in your life? Is it your neighbor with their relentless barking dog? Has a city official ruled against you in a zoning dispute? Did a police officer nail you in a

speed trap at the bottom of the hill in your village? Is your spouse eroding the feelings of love you once felt? Are you tired of changing an elderly person's diaper? Is your coworker stealing your joy in the workplace?

B. How does knowing that God lives in your heart change the way that you view your enemies?

2. If holiness (being set apart) is God's vision for created human beings, then how might you cooperate more fully with God's plan?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 02-16-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the deep truths found in 1 Corinthians and more truths about the kingdom of God and its characteristics as found in Matthew's

Gospel in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach, chapter 15. This section deals with the topic of sin.

First Reading:

If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you;

if you trust in God, you too shall live;

he has set before you fire and water

to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.

Before man are life and death, good and evil,

whichever he chooses shall be given him.

Immense is the wisdom of the Lord;

he is mighty in power, and all-seeing.

The eyes of God are on those who fear him;

he understands man's every deed.

No one does he command to act unjustly,

to none does he give license to sin.

The reading reminds us of the power and effects of the choices we make. A friend of mine refers to this as a like a fabric of cloth where our decision and those decisions made by others affect everyone, not just ourselves. Chief among the choices we make is the one to follow the ways of God, which during the times of the Old Testament was the Jewish Law. In the light of the New Testament, we see how obedience to the led the way to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Obeying the Law pointed

the one and only way to God, through His Savior.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the second reading, St. Paul is contrasting the wisdom of this world with God's wisdom. The Greeks were concerned with human philosophies and persuasive words. The wisdom of God that Paul is referring to is His plan to bring fallen human beings back into right relationship with Himself through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Second Reading:

> *6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:6-10)*

Here are some of the points that Paul uses to help us see the superiority of God's way that lies in sharp contrast to the world's way of doing things. God's wisdom . . .

- Is a mystery. No human philosophy or religious system has the deity paying for the debt of the offending party.
- Was hidden for many years. While it was hinted at in the Old Testament, it was finally revealed in the Person and work of Jesus Christ—specifically His redemptive role in taking our penalty for sin when He died on the cross, then living His life through our surrendered lives with His resurrection power (Eph. 1:18-23).
- Was predestined—God the Father sovereignly orchestrated the events that would reveal His wise plan of sending His Son to live and die in our place. Jesus' death was ordained by God the Father for our benefit ("our glory"). We will eventually share in God's glory because of Christ's willingness to pay our penalty.
- Is different than the world's ways. Those in power (rulers of this age) do not operate according to God's wisdom, which is based on love, sacrifice, relationship and trust. Instead, they operate according to the enemy's philosophy—which is based on deception, brute force and coercion. If the rulers had understood God's way, they would not have crucified Jesus.

- Goes beyond what any human could have devised or dreamed of. We have just touched the tip of the iceberg of all that a relationship with God entails. There's so much more to His love and provision than we are able to experience in this life.
- Is revealed through His Spirit. The Spirit opens our hearts to the depths of God, helping us to understand the goodness of God's ways.

As we think about God's wisdom, we may wonder what difference this makes in our daily lives. If God was wise enough to devise a plan for redemption through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, we can trust Him to be wise enough to work all things in our lives together for good in the lives of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). When we don't understand God's ways, we can rest in the fact that He is wise, he knows what He is doing and He will accomplish something good. As one preacher said, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!" So the fact that God could bring something good (our redemption) out of the death of His Son, gives us faith to walk in trust and on-going surrender to His ways.

The counterintuitive nature of God's wisdom shows up in the Gospel passage as Jesus is teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' premise is that those who are his disciples will be characterized by a different value system than those who live apart from God. Because Christians are now aware that we live in a God-saturated world, our lives will reflect heaven's realities. We must be careful not to reduce this perspective to a list of rules to follow. Instead, we need to see this as a new way of life that is characterized by these things that are impossible to do outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Before we return to our study from last week of the Sermon on the Mount I would like to share a story about how circumstances can drive critical choices in the life of believer who has been given a new heart from God (Romans 18:8-9). I was employed by (and am) one of the owners of a computer software and consulting company. One of my coworkers was responsible for sales and during the course of his employment we had made a friendly relationship with each other. One afternoon a day or two after he had returned from a tiring business trip, I called him at his home office to discuss how we were going to follow up on the clients with whom we had met. During this call, he seemed tired and even paused a few times between his words. I thought that this was unusual but brushed it off by thinking he was probably still tired from the trip. Two days later I received an urgent call from his girlfriend that he had had a heart attack and was in the hospital in a coma. Because he was in the intensive care unit, I wasn't allowed to visit him right away. After a few days, I made the three- and half-hour journey to the hospital and was able to visit him and his family and say my goodbyes. He never regained consciousness and passed away the following morning. After our CFO found out about his passing, we discussed the insurance provisions that he had in place as well as the fact that he was due some a substantial sales commission check as well as reimbursement for his expenses from the previous trip. Although nobody ever know if she didn't send it, she insisted upon sending his sales commission check to his estate. She said that it was from her Christian perspective the right thing to do. Although this man had considerable investments, and the checks our company

sent were small in comparison, our company officer was compelled by her sense of responsibility in the Kingdom of God to settle the amounts. As the years have passed, I have wondered how many employers would have taken advantage of this situation and simply "forgot" to send the funds that were due. Such is the nature of the "other worldly," supernatural motivation that God provides to His obedient believers.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Now we will move onto the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. It is helpful to keep in mind that Matthew was what I would call "the most Jewish" of the writer of the Gospels. Matthew wrote with a uniquely Jewish perspective with his overall purpose being to show that Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah. Matthew assumed that his audience was well grounded in the Jewish culture and belief system. The Jews were well grounded in the belief that the Kingdom of Heaven was to be "other-worldly" and supernatural. Now let's read the text while we imagine a yarmulke on our heads.

Gospel Reading:

> *17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 21 You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent. 27 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. 31 It was said,*

> *'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' 34 But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. 36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil. (Matthew 5:17-37)*

As you can see, this new way of life is "other-worldly" and "supernatural." This is not how the world operates, so it must come from above (John 3:3). As we encounter God's grace as shown in Christ's sacrifice, we are transformed into people who love Him and obey from the heart. Kingdom living is predicated upon surrendering the old way of life to Jesus in order to be tutored in a new way of life that is God-infused. This passage highlights what life in Jesus' Kingdom (when Jesus rules in our hearts) should look like.

- Honoring God by honoring the whole counsel of Scripture. His law will be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) and we will obey because God has given us a new heart (2 Cor. 5:17). As we have seen in past readings, the scribes and Pharisees tried to have an appearance of righteousness (outwardly), but were not fully surrendered to God. Their motives were still selfish and evil.
- Instead of the grace and love of God giving us a license to sin, it motivates us to follow His commands and teach others God's ways.

Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:

- Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
- Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
- Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
- Having integrity and following through with one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

Life in the Kingdom of God, where Jesus rules and reigns in our hearts is very different from the dog-eat-dog world in which we live. God is going to have to restructure our interpretive framework for life in order to transform us from low levels of living to His higher levels of living. This is not

something that we can manufacture, but it is a noble calling to which each person has to decide to respond. Instead, Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:

- Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
- Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
- Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
- Having integrity and following through with one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

May the peace of God that comes only from God guard our hearts this week.

Reflection Questions

1. Spend some time taking an inventory of your life by reflecting on the contrast between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom (as seen in the New Testament reading and the Gospel reading). Which way of thinking most characterizes your life? Which way of thinking would you like to most characterize your life?

2. The above list of Kingdom values characterizes people who are living a God-saturated life. How do you see these traits being lived out in your life? What traits would you like to see be developed as you continue to grow in your relationship with God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 02-09-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Study Notes. This week we will begin with the Gospel reading where we will study a portion of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus' teaching in that portion of Saint Matthew's Gospel has led many people, including me, to leave the Sunday Mass with a tremendous feeling of guilt because we sense that we are not doing enough for God. Scripture provides clear guidance on the right response to this teaching and we will address that in the study today. Then we will move onto the first reading from the Old Testament and then conclude with a continuation of our study in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Matthew Chapter 5, which is a portion of the Sermon on the Mount that includes Chapters 5 through 7. It is important to understand the context of Jesus' message to His disciples. Jesus' sermon was given on a mountain somewhere in Galilee (v.1). Most commentators believer that it was on hill near the west edge of Capernaum which would have provided a commanding view of the Sea of Galilee. Since this wasn't an area that was productive for growing crops it would have allowed large numbers of people to sit and listen to Jesus' teaching without doing damage to the area. Jesus gave at least the first portion of the address directly to the disciples away from the crowds. In verse 1 Saint Matthew said that Jesus went up to the mountain with His

disciples, then "he opened his mouth and taught 'them.'" (v.2, emphasis added). This was, then at least during the beginning portion of the message, a private discipleship training session by Jesus to his handpicked team. However, at the end of the Sermon the crowds seem to have rejoined Him because in 7:28 "the crowds were amazed at His teaching." In summary, at the beginning Jesus addressed His disciples with the crowds in view, but in the later section addressed the crowds with the disciples in view.

The message today was just after the portion of the Sermon on the Mount known as the "Beatitudes." The Beatitudes are pronouncements of blessings for those waiting for the promises of the Messiah, and curses for those who were trying to obtain God's blessing through their own effort. They begin with Chapter 5 verse 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They continue, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (v.4). This pattern continues with blessings for the gentle (v.5), those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (v.6), the merciful (v.7), the pure in heart (v.8), the peacemakers (v.9), and finally the persecuted (vv.10-11). These blessings aren't as much about representing the hallmarks of a true Christian but rather are the blessings that follow when a person submits themselves to God and receives the gifts of His empowerment through the Holy Spirit in community with other believers. Instead of the motto, "If it's going to be it's up to me" the Spirit indwelled believer says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3) and "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (v.4). The nature of the blessed person is the essence of life in the "kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). It's with this God-directed empowerment that we must approach the interpretation of the verses about salt and light being covered in the message today.

As you read the message, think about the importance of salt and light to the people of the first century era.

Gospel Reading:

> *13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)*

Salt and light were essential elements for survival in a society where the modern conveniences of electricity and refrigeration hadn't yet been invented. Light was essential for survival, both for

seeing at night as well as for cooking and food preservation. Just as I struggled to find fuel in the dark when my truck ran out of gas, the First Century people were dependent upon their own source of fuel. Salt and light were essential staples of First Century life. However, what does Jesus mean by asking the rhetorical question about hiding the light and salt losing its saltiness?

Our Christian lives as salt and light are important to the world. Regardless of our career or status in life, our Holy Spirit empowered lives are important to seasoning and lighting our relationships with people in the world. In the same way that Jesus first directed His message in the Sermon on the Mount to His disciples, our place of training and fellowship is in the Church. However, we are not to remain inside the Church to the point of becoming a part of "churchianity." Instead, in the same way that the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount were curious of Jesus' teaching we too must go out and teach the world. We will not only carry the light of the Gospel to the lost, but we ***are*** the light to the lost world. The crucial difference between someone that has lost their saltiness and covered their light and one that spreads salt and light is that the latter has accepted the free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ Who then empowers this person to accomplish those goals. This Holy Spirit directed life is the hallmark of a true believer. The ultimate goal of every believer should be sharing your faith with others, in words and deeds. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (v.16).

I would like to share an illustration with you to help you understand the importance of leaning upon God and others for the empowerment to serve God. I remember back sometime around the late 1980's when my friend and I decided to pack up our snowmobiles and drive from southwestern Michigan to the great white north country of northern Michigan for a one-day trip to ride our snowmobiles. Because we didn't have any means of carrying two snow machines, we both loaded our snowmobiles into our separate trucks and headed north. In my case I had borrowed my dad's Ford F150 which although was a decent running vehicle it consumed large amounts of gas. It had a second minor issue; the gas gauge wasn't accurate below about one quarter of tank. We had an excellent day of riding on the trails around Kalkaska and Bellaire, Michigan. At the end of the day, we even stopped for refreshments at the Schuss Mountain Ski resort. All that was left was to make the two-and-a-half-hour trip back to my parent's home back south. This was shaping up to be an easy and relaxing end to a very fulfilling day of riding. As we made our way south in the dark night, I was uncomfortable with the speed at which my friend was driving so just north of Grand Rapids I lagged behind him a bit. Right after that the truck began losing power, so I blinked my headlights furiously to attract the attention of my friend who by now about a quarter of a mile ahead of me. He evidently didn't see me. The truck soon ground to a halt as I pulled onto the shoulder of the highway. I knew what had happened; I had run the truck out of gas!

Here's a bit of background about me to help you understand my though process that evening. I was raised on a farm and was a member of the clan of engineers known as "MacGyvers," the name of the television character who could construct something out of almost nothing. If you gave me some bits of wire and a few hand tools, I have been known to fix almost anything. My motto was something

like, "if it's going to be it's up to me."

Back to what happened that night. I considered my options and came up with a plan to drain some fuel from the snowmobile into a soda pop can. Since the truck had a cap on the bed, I had a difficult to impossible time trying to tip the machine over far enough to drain out any fuel. Moving onto Plan B I tried to remove a line from the primer bulb in order to pump some fuel into the can and could not get that to work either. When this failed, I moved to Plan C. Since I had very few tools with me, I attempted to remove the fuel tank from the snowmobile in order to pour the gas into the fuel tank in the truck. I couldn't get the tank off without the necessary tools. The cars continued to zoom past me on the highway. I was furious at my friend for leaving me in this mess! Since I was near civilization, I started walking. I had to cross a small creek, navigate dense underbrush and finally cross a very tall barbed wire fence that led me to the parking lot of a movie theatre. I finally got to the point that I had to ask someone for help. The thought crossed my mind to pray so I asked God to help me. I don't know why it was so hard for me to turn to someone else for help, but I guess I hoped that I could just get myself out of this situation! Next, I flagged down a security guard who as it turned out had seen me scale the barbed wire fence. He kindly drove me across the street to a gas station where I was able to borrow a gas can and buy some fuel. This kind man then drove me back to a better location from which I could walk back to my vehicle, although I had to cross the creek again – at night, in the middle of winter, through briars, and without a flashlight. Over the years, I never forgot about that evening!

What did I learn from all of the events that night? One of the areas in which I struggled spiritually was whether I was doing enough for God. I didn't feel that I was salt and light to my nonbelieving friends and those with whom I came in contact. In addition, I remembered the decades of my life hearing the Gospel readings in Mass, which left me feeling guilty about how much I was accomplishing for God. I served as an altar boy until I was sixteen but didn't find fulfillment through it. Once I visited a rest home with our Catechism class and promised myself I would go back, but never did. Years later, after I began studying the Bible on my own, I began to understand that I had to come to the end of my own means and turn to others for help, both in practical and spiritual matters. I reached a major turning point with this revelation. I couldn't "MacGyver" my way through the Christian life, but instead needed to humbly turn to God for help.

God doesn't expect us to accomplish great things for Him without providing us with the means of empowerment. The Holy Spirit is our spiritual fuel. If we have truly repented of our sins and trusted only in the finished work of Jesus Christ, He has empowered us through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and by our relationships with other believers. As you think through the Sermon on the Mount, ask yourself if you have come to the end of yourself and turned to the one and only Source, Jesus Christ. Do you feel guilty that you aren't accomplishing enough for God? As always, we will continue each week in the Mass Notes to reveal what it means to be a true follower of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Now we will move onto the first reading that is from Isaiah Chapter 58. Since you have already studied an example of what a God-directed life looks like in the Sermon on the Mount you will likely understand Isaiah's text quite differently. As you read, praise God for how He has empowered His children as salt and light in our generation through their generous Holy Spirit directed actions. Second, contrast the behavior of the former person with someone like King Saul who was motivated by self-centered thinking (1 Samuel 13).

First Reading:

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6 "Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? 7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, 10 And if you give yourself to the hungry And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness And your gloom will become like midday. (Isaiah 58:7-10)

Notice the amazing similarity with the Sermon on the Mount. The Holy Spirit-directed believer "divides bread with the hungry" (v.7a), houses the homeless (v.7b), and provides clothing to those without it (v.7c). As a result, these believers shine light like the dawn (v.8), and God hears and answers their prayers (v.9). They respond in physical ways by filling the needs of those less fortunate but more importantly, they are spiritual salt and light to a lost, sin-stained, dying world. Isaiah's message was given to a generation of people who had neglected what Saint James in the New Testament called "basic religion." "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). His message is equally relevant to the people in our generation.

What does the Sermon on the Mount and Isaiah's message mean for us today? First, God provides blessings to those who are in spiritual communion with Him. This communion comes only through a personal relationship and saving faith in Jesus Christ. Second, God provides us with the means of

empowerment to live the Christian life to be salt and light to a dying world. Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever" (John 14:16). He has given us this Comforter Who is God living inside of us (John 14:17c). What should you do if you feel that you aren't doing enough for God? Ask Jesus to be your sufficiency and allow God to change your heart from being motivated by guilt to being motivated by grace.

Recently my wife and I had dinner with our neighbors and their three daughters. During dinner, we found out that one of the young ladies had recently taken a special interest in a certain young man at her church. She explained that this was a recent development because prior to this time she had considered him awkward and she didn't want to have any sort of romantic relationship with him. Then one day she told us that she decided to pray about that matter and she got an idea about how to proceed. She felt the need to pray that if this relationship was something that was from God, she asked God to change her heart towards him, and if not that God should change his heart away from her. So, she prayed this prayer and God did indeed change her heart. The message is that if you don't feel you are doing enough for God you should ask God to change your heart.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Now we will move onto the second reading. Last week we completed our study in First Corinthians Chapter 1 and this week we will move onto Chapter 2. As you read, remember what Paul discussed in Chapter 1 about how the Corinthian Church was being torn by sexual immorality and division.

Second Reading:

> *1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, 4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)*

Paul claimed God's authority for his message (v.1c), saying that his message was directly from God. Next he explained how he humbly proclaimed this message from God "in fear and in much trembling" (v.3a); not through the use of the Grecian persuasive techniques of the day but rather through a "demonstration of the Spirit and power" (v.4). The reason he did that, said Paul, was so that the Corinthians' faith would be based upon the Word of God and not on Paul's rhetorical argument (v.5).

What does Paul's message mean for us today? First, we may not have the ability to provide an

eloquent argument for our faith but that doesn't mean that we should remain silent. Saint Peter said, "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1Pe 3:15). This is one way in which we bring salt and light to a world that is dying without the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Second, we are to rely on the Word of God, not our own persuasive strategies as we share our faith with others. The Word is God is powerful and will provide us with a tremendous resource to use as a witnessing tool once we have hidden it in our heart (i.e. memorized key verses). "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" (Hebrews 4:12). Third, it is okay to not have all the answers, since our lack will be an opportunity for others to see how Jesus compensates for our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Reflection Questions

1. There is a basic misunderstanding of the role of guilt in most of our lives. Guilt often leads us to a think: "I'll work on that and get better." Instead, guilt is supposed to lead us to think: "I need You, Lord." Think about a time that you felt guilty about not doing enough for God. What was the circumstance that brought this about? In light of what you learned from the Sermon on the Mount, what would be a better way of responding to this feeling?
2. The Catholic priest Henri Nouwen, who died several years ago, said the following in Wil Hernandez's book "A Spirituality of Imperfection" (Paulist Press, 2006). "God has deliberately chosen to break through human history in the person of Christ manifesting total weakness in birth and dying on the cross in voluntary powerlessness" (p. 79). How does Christ's example of humility and weakness help you to act as salt and light to those people whom God has placed in your life? Consider this in light of what you learned from the reading in First Corinthians.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 02-02-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Study Notes. This week we look at the Old Testament Prophet Malachi as well as the New Testament Book of Hebrews. We will look at the exciting provisions of the New Covenant. Then we move onto the continuing story of the early life of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Malachi Chapter 3. Malachi is the last of the Old Testament Prophets, and he wrote concerning the era just after the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem. The story of the rebuilding of the temple of God, along with the re-establishment of the people of God of God after exile is chronicled in the Prophet Nehemiah, a Prophet contemporary with Malachi. Malachi also saw near term and distant events "telescoped" together, like Isaiah who we discussed last week. As you read, see if you can determine the identity of the messenger referred to in the first verse.

First Reading:

> *1 "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years." (Malachi 3:1-4)*

Malachi said that God would send His messenger in order to prepare the way for God the Messiah, designated by "Me" in verse 1. In other words, Malachi said that God would send someone to announce the coming of the Messiah Jesus Christ. No human can stand before the Messiah, because He is the ultimate in holiness. God said that the Messiah would purify the Levitical Priesthood, in the same way that the dross was burned away during the refining process of gold and silver (v.3). The stated purpose of the refinement of the Priesthood was so that they could once again present sacrifices to the Lord (v.4). While this may seem distant to those of us reading who are not of the Levitical Priesthood, the New Testament informs us that all Christians are "a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). So, the Messiah has already begun this purifying work in the hearts of his followers, as we surrender ourselves to Him and allow Him to be Lord of our lives.

It's interesting to note that in the original language the word that was translated "messenger" was "malak," meaning "angel or messenger," the root of the name of Malachi. Therefore, as a prophet, Malachi was a messenger of God. But, to whom was he referring to as the messenger in verse 1? We know from the Gospel of Saint Matthew that the "messenger" (v.1a) was John the Baptist. Jesus said, "This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU'" (Matthew 11:10). The coming of this messenger was also predicted by the Prophet Isaiah who said, "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3). John the Baptist, the greatest man that ever lived until that time (Matthew 11:11), had a very important mission. John's mission was to announce the coming of yet another messenger, the Lord Himself, spoken of by Malachi as the Messenger of the Covenant (Malachi 3:1). Jesus was the Messenger of the covenant people we know as the Jews. The Messenger of the New Covenant, none other than Jesus Christ Himself, will as Malachi said, "sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness" (Malachi 3:3). What do we mean by the New Covenant, and by calling the Jews a "covenant people?" Let's explore those concepts below.

The Jews were a covenant people, meaning that God had sworn various covenants with them. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible. First was the Noahic Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7). The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant from Genesis Chapter 12. In this God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v.1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v.3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through

which God introduced the Law (Exodus 19). The promises of the Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The fourth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b) and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v.34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

We read in Hebrews Chapter 8, the same book we will look at in the second reading, that Jesus was the fulfillment of the New Covenant promises.

> *7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. 8 For finding fault with them, He says, "BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL EFFECT A NEW COVENANT WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND WITH THE HOUSE OF JUDAH; 9 NOT LIKE THE COVENANT WHICH I MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS ON THE DAY WHEN I TOOK THEM BY THE HAND TO LEAD THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT; FOR THEY DID NOT CONTINUE IN MY COVENANT, AND I DID NOT CARE FOR THEM, SAYS THE LORD. 10 "FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. 11 AND THEY SHALL NOT TEACH EVERYONE HIS FELLOW CITIZEN, AND EVERYONE HIS BROTHER, SAYING, 'KNOW THE LORD,' FOR ALL WILL KNOW ME, FROM THE LEAST TO THE GREATEST OF THEM. 12 FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE." 13 When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. (Hebrews 8:7-13)*

The life of Jesus is manifested in believers through the Person of the Holy Spirit Who indwells us at the moment of our spiritual birth (John 3:3). Paul said, "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11). We celebrate our new life by being obedient to the things which Jesus calls us to accomplish. "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).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews, Chapter 2. As you read keep in mind the verses that we just read from Chapter 8, and ask yourself the question: how is Jesus able to come to our aid

when *we* are tempted? *Note: The second reading included only verses 14 – 18, verses 11-13 were added to provide the necessary context).*

Second Reading:

> *11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12 saying, "I WILL PROCLAIM THY NAME TO MY BRETHREN, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL SING THY PRAISE." 13 And again, "I WILL PUT MY TRUST IN HIM." And again, "BEHOLD, I AND THE CHILDREN WHOM GOD HAS GIVEN ME." 14 Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; 15 and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. 16 For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. 17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:11-18*

God helps us, as believers in Jesus and descendants of Abraham (v.16) to resist temptation. Jesus knows about temptation, having suffered terribly in temptations that we cannot comprehend. "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (v.18). Saint James told how temptation comes about. "14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14-15). How does God provide deliverance for us from temptation (Matthew 6:13)? Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1Corinthians 10:13). God helps us to endure our temptation when we turn to Him *before* we yield to the sin (James 1:15a) and stand firm in His promises that we will be delivered. Knowing that Jesus is an empathetic high priest is an important component to be able to turn to Him in the midst of temptation. Since He has experienced temptation and has conquered it, we can ask Him for strength and wisdom to also resist and conquer. While this sense of victory may not happen overnight, we will steadily grow in our ability to receive His help in our times of need. In the meantime, we are growing in our relationship of trust with Jesus when we turn to Him and not to our own strength or willpower.

Here's an illustration about counting on the promises of God to deliver us from temptation. On

certain days, very bad weather arose during the times that I wanted to fly my airplane. Since my airplane was a very well-equipped machine that possessed most of the bells and whistles including weather radar, it was fairly easy to launch into weather conditions which were overly challenging. I remember staring up at the overcast sky one day as the ragged clouds almost reached down to the tops of the trees at the airport from which I wanted to "depart," pun intended. I remember thinking of a promise that I had made to myself some years before. All I had to do was to be patient and wait and at some future date the miserable gray sky would be replaced with a perfect blue (and safe) atmosphere in which I wouldn't kill myself (at least so easily). If I would just wait a few days, the very same patch of sky that held nothing but clouds and rain would one day soon hold beautiful clear sky and sunshine. All that I had to do to keep from getting in trouble in that miserable overcast weather was to keep remembering my promise. All we must do when we find ourselves in a position of temptation is to remember the promises of God. He will make the gray skies of temptation clear for us if we will stand on His promises and trust Him to deliver us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson today is from Luke Chapter 2. This passage tells us about when Jesus was brought to the Temple to be dedicated to the LORD as a baby. As you read, make a list of all of the different people mentioned along with the roles.

Gospel Reading:

> *22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS." 25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel." 33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed– 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul–to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." 36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She*

> *never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. 38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. 40 The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him (Luke 2:22-40).*

Joseph and Mary went to the temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law as specified in Leviticus Chapter 12. The requirements were as follows. After the circumcision on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3) Mary was to wait thirty-three days, then present the Baby Jesus to the priests in the temple and make a sin offering. "When the days of her purification are completed, for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting a one year old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering" (v.6). "But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean" (v.8). Mary and Joseph fulfilled the requirements of the Law by making the offering to God through their intercessor, the priest in the temple.

After a prophetic silence of four hundred years, God revealed to Simeon and Anna the identity of the much-awaited Messiah. The identity of the Messiah was confirmed by two witnesses as was required by Old Testament Law, per the principle in Deuteronomy 19:15. Simeon knew that the Messiah would appear during his lifetime and when He did appear, he made a prophecy about His ministry. Simeon revealed more about the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah, that the plan of salvation would be unfolded through Jesus to include the Gentiles (v. 31). He also said to Mary that "a sword would pierce her soul" and a general prophecy about how the Messiah would be received. He said, "this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed." We know that this was indeed the case; many of Jesus' own people rejected Him. Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were **unwilling**" (Matthew 23:37, emphasis added). Though God was silent for four hundred years He spoke powerfully through the birth of the Messiah Jesus.

Looking back to our discussion on the covenants it's important to note that although Jesus' parents obeyed the Jewish Law, after Jesus' death and resurrection the Levitical priesthood was set aside. This provision in the New Covenant ushered in something that many may not have expected by the Old Testament Prophets – the era of the priesthood of all believers, which was mentioned earlier. Christ our High Priest has made one sacrifice for sin for all time (Hebrews 10:12), and there is no

more sacrifice for sin that can be made (Hebrews 10:26). But as priests once offered other kinds of sacrifices in the temple, so it is clear from 1 Peter 2:5,9 that God has chosen Christians "to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We play a vital role in representing God to the world by living lives that are consistent with His holiness.

While the Levitical priesthood was set aside and the New Covenant era of the priesthood of all believers was begun, this setting aside was only temporary. Paul explained this in the following verses from Romans.

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; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 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; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, (Romans 11:25-30)

We can rejoice that although God used the disobedience of the Jews to bring many Christians to trust in Jesus, He has not abandoned His plan for Israel. Paul said that in the end times, "all Israel will be saved" (v.26). We can also celebrate that God was patient with us, not wanting any of us to perish and all to come to the knowledge of everlasting life (2 Peter 3:9). Jeremiah prophesied that God would give us a new heart, something that Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 as being born from above (John 3:3). Paul explained that this new birth came from believing that we are sinners (Romans 3:23), accepting that our due payment for sin was eternal separation from God to pay the debt we owe (Romans 6:23), and then placing our trust in Jesus as a free gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). Praise God for His eternal provision for us!

Reflection Questions

1. How can we lean upon the promises of God if we don't know the promises of God? Read the following verses and in your journal begin memorizing these so you have them in your mental toolkit.

   Philippians 4:19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

   Matthew 11:28-29 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Romans 8:37-39 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2. To continue understanding your role as a New Testament believer and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, look up the following Scripture to see what your proper response is to this high calling:

(Editor's Note: Reading this online make is easy because viewers can just mouse over the verses to read them.)

- 1 Peter 2:5-9
- 1 Peter 3:15
- Hebrews 13:9-17
- Ephesians 2:10
- Titus 2:11-14
- Romans 12:1-2
- 1 Cor. 6:9-12
- Rev. 1:6
- Rev. 22:3-4

Talk to God about where you need His help prompted by the reading of any of the above passages.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 01-26-2020



Welcome back to the Study Note for the Sunday Mass. This week we will again return to Isaiah and see in the Gospel lesson how the prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus. As in Isaiah's day, we too are living in a land of deep spiritual darkness, one in which we need both spiritual and physical healing through our Savior Jesus. After Jesus' First Advent, Scripture says that the best is yet to come when He returns to set up His Kingdom rule on earth. During this time there will no longer be any darkness because the Lord our God will be our Light (Revelation 22:5). As the believers during Isaiah's time celebrated because of his prophetic message of hope, we too can celebrate because of his prophecy of the coming Light through the return of the Lord Jesus. As we see evil men grow worse and worse (2 Timothy 3:13), similar to what was happening in Isaiah's time, we can look forward to the coming King who will reverse the curse placed upon the world through the sin of Adam (Genesis 3:17).

This week we are going to begin with the second reading and then cover the first reading and Gospel lesson last since the content on those two are closely related.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The first reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Last week we looked at the

introduction to this Letter that Paul wrote to the crossroads city, a place entrenched in immorality and worship of a plurality of gods. To review, Paul's overall purposes of the Letter were to deal with some divisions in the church, address some serious moral issues, defend his apostolic authority, and to specifically answer several questions from a letter they sent to him (1 Corinthians 7:1).

As you read, what is one word that best summarizes Paul's concern for the Corinthians in this section?

Second Reading:

> *10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. 16 Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. (1 Corinthians 1:10-17)*

What word came to your mind which best summarized Paul's concern? For me it was "disunity." Paul was calling the local church in Corinth to unite for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel. Look at verses 17 and 18, just past where the reading stopped. Here we see an insight into why unity was important in the church. Paul said, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 17-18). In other words, Jesus sent him to preach the good news so that the minds of the unbelievers would be transformed such that they recognized the power of God. Later in First Corinthians Paul said, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, **so that they may be saved**" (1 Corinthians 10:32-33, emphasis added).

Second, Paul was warning the local church in Corinth *not to unite* along the lines of a "cult of personality" (as has happened in so many churches since then). Paul provided specific examples of how this disunity was happening in the church through the practice of baptism of family members in

the house churches of the region. Someone may have said something like, "I am more spiritual than you because **I** was baptized by Paul but you were only baptized by Apollos."

Paul stood in good company with those that called the local church to unity. Jesus said in His prayer about the church, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me **through their word**; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21). Jesus prayed on behalf of His disciples who had believed by firsthand knowledge *and* for those who believed through the *testimony* of His disciples (v.20b, "through their word").Unity is important in the church because it's through this unified message that God's power is revealed. All of the believers after the era of the disciples have come to faith in Jesus through the testimony of "**the word"** and "**their word**." "The word" is the testimony of the disciples through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit written into what we call the New Testament Bible. "Their word" is both the testimony of the disciples *and* the testimony of all believers. Jesus' purpose in this message was a calling for the church of God be unified in their proclamation of the Gospel so that the entire world may believe (John 17:21f).

Introduction to the First Reading:

As we leave the second reading, we will move to the Old Testament reading and the Gospel message. The first reading is from Isaiah, the prophet whom we have studied extensively over the past several months. The context of this section of Isaiah was just after his warning to the Northern Kingdoms that they would be overtaken by Assyria. This was a time of gloom and anguish for the Nation of Israel. He wrote the prophecy and delivered it to Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah so that there would be two witnesses as required by the Law such that when the event was fulfilled his authority as God's spokesman would be confirmed (Isaiah 8:2).

Let's read the Scripture, and as you do it will become apparent who the Galilean is about whom Isaiah is speaking.

First Reading:

> *1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. 2 The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them. 3 You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. (Isaiah 9:1-4 – Verse markings differ in this NASB version.)*

Clearly, Isaiah spoke about Jesus of Galilee (Mark 1:9). He said that people "will see a great light" (v.2b) in the future sense, yet he saw through a telescopic lens of prophecy through which he recorded near term and distant events together. In this case, he saw both the First and the Second Advent of Jesus together as the accomplishment of God's deliverance from their oppressor. Those that are in a state of spiritual darkness will rejoice when their oppressors have been broken (v.4). The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were distant areas just to the west of the Jordan in Galilee that were easily subject to invasion from the foreign enemies. It was in this area that the Lord Jesus called His first disciples, as we will see next in the Gospel message. The Battle of Midian referred to Gideon's victorious battle with his small army of just 300 men waged against the Midianites in Judges 7:22-21:25. It's also important to note that the prophecy of the multiplication of the Nation of Israel (Genesis 22:17) will be fulfilled in the yet future (v.3a).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel message Jesus began assembling his first disciples after John the Baptist had been arrested. You will see how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy from the Old Testament reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; 13 and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. 14 This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 15 "THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES– 16 THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED." 17 From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 18 Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. 19 And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 21 Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him. 23 Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:12-23)*

In this message, Saint Matthew confirmed that Jesus did in fact fulfill Isaiah's prophecy and quoted it directly as proof. Since the Law required two witness (Deuteronomy 19:15, Isaiah 8:2), God satisfied this requirement through the testimony of both the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Father at Jesus Baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). Jesus took up where John the Baptist left off, saying the same thing as John, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17). Then he settled in the same region that Isaiah prophesied would see a great light (v.16). Here Jesus called four men into discipleship and ministry: Simon Peter, Andrew, and finally James and John, called the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). As He began his ministry he went about teaching, proclaiming the Good News, and healing (v.23). How wonderful would it be to have Jesus with us in his human presence so that we could avail ourselves of His powerful ministry? The truth of the New Covenant is that He does live with us each day through the Holy Spirit – teaching us, proclaiming the Good News, and healing us of our destructive ways. May we learn to listen and receive the ministry of Jesus in our daily lives.

Reflection Questions

In the second reading from 1 Corinthians we mentioned the "transformation of the mind" for the purpose of spreading the Gospel message to the world through the power of God. Read the following verses and then answer the question below.

> *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2).*
>
> *Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)*
>
> *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:16-18)*

What are the prerequisites for someone to have his or her mind be transformed in order to be able to recognize the power of God? According to the Scriptures, what role does a person's active, actual calling upon the name of the play?

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