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

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-13-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **12-13-2015**. This week we open with a reading from Zephaniah, one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," largely because their 12 prophecies are shorter than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we move to one of the Epistles of St. Paul, Philippians, a letter likely written from a prison cell in Rome, making its theme of joy even more significant. Finally we conclude with a reading from Luke's Gospel, which includes some interesting instructions for the people of Jesus' day.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Zephaniah has been called "the Royal Prophet," probably because he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He was the last of the prophets before the captivity of Judah and ministered during the reign of Josiah who tried to restore proper worship practices which had been pretty much abandoned in Judah. His message centers on "the Day of the LORD," which is seen from two perspectives: 1) a time of judgment against sinners, and 2) a time of blessing for those who follow God.

First Reading:

Zephaniah 3:14-18 NAS95 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You

will fear disaster no more. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. 18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts–They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

The first two-thirds of the prophecy deal with God's judgment of sin and apostasy. Someone has said that the book is an out-working of the text, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). God's people must worship Him and Him alone. Otherwise, judgment will come, and in this case it is to be the captivity of the nation by Babylonia, which did occur in —.

Today's reading, however, is in a concluding portion of the book that looks forward—beyond the captivity—to a time, yet future, when Israel will rejoice in the promised Kingdom blessing, chapter 3:9-20). Such a blessed future will be occasion to "shout for joy … shout in triumph … rejoice and exult." Why? Because God has "taken away His judgments against you" and "He has cleared away your enemies." What causes for joy and rejoicing? But, even more astounding, the promise is that God Himself will be among them. The phrase is repeated: "The LORD is in your midst" (vv. 15, 17).

As in other Old Testament prophecies, Zephaniah warns his people that judgment is certain; it will come at the Day of the Lord's wrath. But, he admonishes them in chapter 2:1-3 to "Seek the Lord … seek righteousness; seek humility." There will be a restoration, as we see in chapter 3; a remnant will be saved.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Zephaniah had promised a time of future joy and rejoicing after severe judgment and captivity. In this epistle, Paul encourages Christians to find their joy and peace in God in the midst of trials and difficult circumstances. He himself had suffered to even get to Philippi some years before (see Acts 16), and he understands how stressful life can be. But, as in Zephaniah, it's the promised presence of God that enables the Christian to live above life's stresses and rejoice in God's goodness.

Second Reading:

Philippians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Chapter four of this power-packed letter emphasizes the power that Jesus provides for the Christian's life. There is strength in unity, vv. 1-3; strength from God's peace, vv. 4-7; strength from God's presence, vv. 8-9; and strength from God's provision, vv. 10-19. We look today at the significant words from verses 4-7.

Paul instructs the Philippians with emphasis, "rejoice." That joy is possible, of course, only because it is "in the Lord." Outside of one's personal trust in the all-sufficient grace and mercy of God, there is no lasting source of joy. He encourages the believer to be gentle. Though translated a variety of ways ("forbearing," "moderation"), its meaning in the original language if "sweet reasonableness." Wouldn't life be so much more pleasant if we lived in a continue environment of sweet reasonableness? How is that possible? Well, believers in Jesus must be constantly aware that "The Lord is near." Not merely that He is watching judgmentally but that He is near to help, to keep us sweet and reasonable. The indwelling Christ does that for us when we cannot by ourselves.

The next admonition is so difficult for many of us. He writes, "Be anxious for nothing." Didn't Paul realize the many anxieties those first-century Christians were facing? How could it tell them not to worry? He is likely saying that Christians should not be distracted by the affairs of life that they forget the real source of life, peace, and joy. It's good to remember that he was living in circumstances that may have been far more difficult than the Philippians at that time. But, more importantly, he provides the antidote for anxiety: prayer and thanksgiving. Nothing in life is beyond the realm of prayer. We may and should take everything to God in prayer; He should be our first resort, not the last. We should approach God with confidence that He is both able and willing to relieve our fears.

The result is the incomprehensible peace that only God can provide. Peace is not just the absence of fear or stress. It is, as the Hebrews say, "Shalom." The term implies wholeness, harmony, completeness. Those attributes can be found only in the God of Peace. Here are Paul's words from another of his epistles: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels all cover the life and ministry of Jesus, each from a different perspective with somewhat different purposes in mind—all, however, to reveal the purposes of His coming to the glory of God. Luke's telling emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. His audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the Gospel is for both Jews and Gentles.

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title

He frequently uses to speak of Himself).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:10-18 NAS95 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

Today's reading reports on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. John's words just prior to this reading were rather scathing. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He had been prophesying that that the Lord would come to straighten the crooked places and make level the rough ways. "All flesh," he said," shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

It is in response to that teaching that the crowd asked, "Then what shall we do?" John the Baptist lists a number of practices that his listeners could pursue that would demonstrate a genuine change of heart that he has been calling for. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1). A man with two coats could show his heart change by giving one to someone who had not. Likewise, with someone who has enough food; he can share.

When the tax collectors (usually men who collected more than the tax due to enlarge their own pockets) indicated they wanted to enter the waters of baptism for repentance, John tells them to collect only what is the proper tax. Soldiers also asked about their responsibility, and John pointed out what, apparently, were the illegal practices of some: taking money by force, falsely accusing people, complaining about their wages. They are to discontinue such practices.

All of this had the people conjecturing about who this prophet really was. Could he be the Messiah? John responds to clarify his role by noting his inferiority to the One he is preparing the way for. John's baptism was with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (was was to be fulfilled in Acts 2). It's interesting to note the final words of this reading, "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Yet, the preceding words are words of judgment

("winnowing fork," "burn up the chaff"). You see the gospel has two facets. It offers the free grace of God in response to faith in the work of Jesus, but it promised judgment to those who reject Jesus.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In light of the second reading, list the ways in which you daily lay down your anxieties to God. Do I have the unexplainable joy and peace of God because I pray with thanksgiving and give my anxieties to Him?

2. In the Gospel reading the crowd asked John, "Then what shall we do?" to which John responded with a list of practices believers in God exhibited as evidence of their change in heart. List two ways in which your life provides this evidence of turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to living out your life for God.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/121315.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-6-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **12-6-2015**. This week's reading begins with a passage from the Apocrypha. We begin our exposition with the second reading which is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi then conclude with the Gospel reading from the third chapter of Luke. The Philippians passage allows us to see into the heart of the Apostle Paul and the mutual affection he shared with the believers in Philippi. The Gospel account introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. The reading includes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which foretells something about both John's ministry and the work of the one whom he introduced. [By Jesse Deloe]

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The beginning of Paul's ministry in Philippi is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 16, beginning at verse 11. Philippi was a leading city in the Roman colony of Macedonia, and became the location of the first Christian church in Europe. While there, Paul and his companions were mistreated because of their preaching and were imprisoned. Paul and

Silas were miraculously released during an earthquake and had the opportunity to bring about the conversion of the jailer and his family as a result. The missionary team departed the city and continued what is regarded as Paul's second missionary journey.

Paul wrote the letter to his converts in Philippi to express his gratitude for their financial support in his time of need. The letter was delivered by Epaphroditus, Paul's companion. This is a very personal letter that encourages the church to live with joy and in unity.

Second Reading:
Philippians 1:4-11 NAS95 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Typical of his letters, Paul tells his readers about his prayers for them. He is joyful because of their involvement with him in the sharing of the gospel from the very beginning of their relationship with him. They can have great joy, he writes, because of his confidence that what God started in them at their conversion will be completed. They will be preserved and kept until the "day of Christ Jesus," no doubt a reference to the second coming of Christ to establish His eternal kingdom, about which Paul writes in many of His epistles. That confidence should encourage today's believers, also. If a person has placed his trust in the work of Christ to provide salvation, he can be assured that he will be saved until the very end.

Verses 7 and 8 assure the Philippians of Paul's great affection for them. He tells them, "I have you in my heart." That is true, in part, because he considers that they have been a significant part of his life through their gifts and prayers and during his imprisonment and the difficult times he has had in proclaiming the gospel. His feeling for them is so great that he describes it in strong terms of longing and affection.

The specific elements of Paul's prayer reveal his concern that these converts grow in their

spiritual lives. He prays that their love may increase continually. It is not just a feeling, however; it is a love that is based on "knowledge" and "discernment." In the 20 centuries since Paul wrote those words, current society seems to have lost the real meaning of love. Today, it seems to be either a fleeting sentiment based on passing emotions or a purely physical attraction. But true love requires knowing the loved one well and the ability to discern qualities worthy of affection.

Such discernment enables one to choose what is truly best ("excellent" is Paul's term). He writes in a later chapter that Christians should "let [their] mind dwell on" things that are honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good report "if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise" (4:8). Why? So that until the end of life on earth they will be "sincere and blameless." It is only by filling our minds with those kinds of things that we can live a holy and righteous life. It must have been difficult for believers to live such godly lives in their godless society. What a challenge that is for 21st century Christians with the constant influences of evil through the ever-present media of our times.

Is it possible to live such holy lives? To be sure, it is difficult. But the final portion of today's reading reveals the secret. It is possible only because the believer, as Paul writes, has "been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ." Apart from the indwelling Christ, it would be impossible to be blameless, but while we are still in our present bodies and are incapable of perfection, we do have the power within to increase in holiness and righteous behavior. And, Paul reminds us that all such spiritual progress will be "to the glory and praise of God."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we begin the next reading, we should remember that Luke's Gospel is the result of careful study so that he can present an accurate review of the life and ministry of Jesus. He introduces his story by assuring the readers of "having investigated everything carefully from the beginning." Luke's perspective, not in contrast with the other Gospels but as complementary to them, focuses on Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human.

Although Luke seems to be writing mainly to Gentile Christians, he makes it clear that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He seeks to add to the knowledge of those early Christians confirming that what they already believed was true and trustworthy. Today's reading follows the first two lengthy chapters which relate the stories of Christ's birth and surrounding events. As we approach the Christmas holiday, it might be good to re-read

those familiar passages before looking at today's text more carefully.

Gospel Reading:
Luke 3:1-6 NAS95 1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. 5 'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; 6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'"

Verse 1 of today's reading gives very specific details of the political and geographical environment into which John the Baptist was to come. Verse 2 introduces the religious leaders of the immediate area. Furthermore, it states that "the word of God came to John" as a simple fact without indicating how or under what circumstances except that it came "in the wilderness" where John seemed to live (Matthew 3:1-5). Zacharias is noted as John's father. The unique story of the announcement and birth of John is recorded earlier in Luke's Gospel (1:5-25).

John the Baptist's message was very clear. Luke says he came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." We should be reminded that repentance means a lot more than just being sorry for your sin. The New Testament word actually means "changing your mind," and it's not just a mental attitude. Genuine repentance involves a change in behavior that results from the renewed mind. John must have been a powerful preacher (enabled by the Holy Spirit, of course), because many responded to his message, repented, and were baptized. Elsewhere, we read that John's message of repentance included his preaching that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This is the same message Jesus preached (Matthew 4:17).

All of this was predicted centuries before by the prophet Isaiah (ch. 40) as repeated by Luke in today's reading. The first prophesied statement is obviously fulfilled in John. Clearly, he was a voice "crying in the wilderness." In an apparent allusion to the preparations that were usually made for a dignitary's travel, John is to make the way clear for the promised Messiah by his teaching. The next several clauses are thought to be poetic ways of saying

that the way for Messiah will be advanced, and obstacles will be removed. These clauses may also be metaphors suggesting that the proud and arrogant will be humbled.

Verse 6 quite clearly has reference to the ministry of Messiah, not John the Baptist. In the preceding chapter (2:30-32) Luke had quoted other Scriptures indicating that salvation ultimately would be for both Jews and Gentiles. This is a message that Luke particularly emphasized since he was writing primarily to a Gentile audience, and the Jewish population often mistakenly thought that salvation was for Israel alone.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What did you learn today about having confidence that God has begun a good work in you and will complete it? That is possible only if you have put your personal trust in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to atone for your sin.

2. In what ways are you filling your mind with the "excellent" things of life that will honor God and build your Christian character?

3. During the past year, what are some specific circumstances when you acknowledged your sin before God, and change your mind and behavior so that you can live a life of holiness?

Readings for the Week

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-29-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **11-29-2015**. This week we open with teaching from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah then move to one of the Apostle Paul's letters to a young church in the earliest years of Christianity. Finally we look at a prophetic portion of the Gospel of Luke. These are not easy passages to understand, but we'll take a careful but brief look at each one.

Introduction to the First Reading:

It's helpful to remember that Jeremiah lived during the time of Judah's spiritual downfall and the beginning of her captivity about 500 B.C. Assyria had been the dominant nation of the time, but was tottering on the brink of ruin, while Babylon and Egypt were struggling to take over world control. Jeremiah warned of Babylon's victory, but Judah failed to repent and ignored his warnings. As a result, Judah suffered destruction, but the prophet announced that she would one day be restored and come into worldwide blessing.

Jeremiah's prophecy reveals God in two aspects like the two sides of a single coin. The book demonstrates His demands and judgment, but it also shows the tenderness of His love. He had chosen this particular prophet to give His message, perhaps, because of Jeremiah's sensibilities and tenderness. One writer has suggested that in that way Jeremiah was "the true forerunner of our Lord."

The purpose of this Old Testament book is twofold: to reveal God's attitude toward sin (thus, the

punishment of Israel who had sinned against Him) and to reveal the coming restoration of Israel under their coming king.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 33:14-16 NAS95 14 'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 'In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. 16 'In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness.'

Jeremiah 33 is the final chapter in a section, beginning with chapter 30, that has to do with the restoration of Israel. The opening words in this passage are obviously prophetic; that is, they are referring to some events yet in the future. But there is no clear indication of when these events will occur—relatively soon or at some distant point in the future. There are a few inferences, however, that give us some understanding of God's plan for His people. It's evident, for example, that the writer is revealing God's program for "the house of Israel and the house of Judah." These terms identify the two segments of the nation of Israel that had been divided after the reign and death of King Solomon. God's "good word" about His chosen people will be fulfilled. What He has planned and now intimates will be completed in His chosen time.

At some future point in time ("in those days and at that time") a "Branch of David" will appear. This term takes us back to chapter 22, verses 2 and 4 where the writer makes reference to the "king of Judah, who sits on David's throne" and "kings will enter the gates of this house, sitting in David's place on his throne." Again, we are made to think of God's covenant spoken of in 2 Samuel 7:8-17 where God promised that David and his heirs would rule over Israel. God said, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).

The promises of verses 15 and 16 of today's reading should have been a great encouragement to Israel, who was to suffer certain captivity and removal from her land. In the future, the promised king is to execute justice and righteousness on the earth." As a result, "In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety." That will be a time unlike anything in Israel's previous history. She has always been attacked by godless nations, and, even in our day, persecution continues for today's Jewish people. Praise God, some day that will end!

The final statement of our reading suggests an unusual name for God's people. Jeremiah wrote, "And this is the name by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness.'" Perhaps the intention is to remind Jeremiah's audience that righteousness is not the result of anything one can do—offer sacrifices, observe the sacraments, serve others, etc.—but righteousness is found only in Jesus Christ. As the Christian identifies with Jesus and His finished work on the cross, it is the righteousness of Jesus that is conferred upon the believer. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin

on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). "Not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Philippians 3:9).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Some scholars think that 1 Thessalonians may have been the earliest book written in the New Testament. The church in the city of Thessalonica (in modern day Greece) was launched on the second of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. He was there for about three weeks, teaching about the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, whom he identified as the Messiah (Christ). Some responded well to Paul, but others rejected his message (because of jealousy, Acts 17:5) and forced him to leave town.

Paul wrote this letter to encourage the Thessalonian Christians and to give them further teaching, especially about the return of Christ, which is a common topic in the book, referred to in all five chapters.

In many of his letters to the young churches in the first century Paul offers significant prayers on the readers' behalf, also asking them to pray for him. Today's reading begins with a part of one of those prayers (3:11-13) and concludes with a challenge to the people (4:1-2).

Second Reading:

1 Thessalonians 3:12 – 4:2 NAS95 12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; 13 so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. 1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

Paul's great love and concern for his learners is evident in his frequent mention of wanting to visit with them and his continual prayers for them. Before his prayer, beginning in verse 11, Paul tells them that he prays "earnestly . . . night and day" that he might see them face-to-face. Why? Not only because he loves them, but he also wants to continue his ministry to them, completing "what is lacking in your faith," that is, giving them a full understanding of the truth they have adopted.

In his prayer, Paul makes four requests: 1) that God might clear the way so that he could see the Thessalonians again; 2) that he might be able to supply what was incomplete in their fledgling faith; 3) that their love for one another might increase; and 4) that they would be spiritually strengthened

and be found blameless and holy.

Regarding their love, we should note that it begins with one another and then includes "all people." Jesus said that his disciples were to be known by their love for one another (John 13:35). It's truly unfortunate that Christians and churches are sometimes criticized by outsiders because of the divisions and animosity that seem to characterize some groups of professing believers. As the people of the church learn to love one another more fully, their testimony to the world will be enhanced. But, love is not to be limited to within the church family. As God "so loved the world" (John 3:16), so should His people love those who need the Savior. Paul uses himself as an example of love; he says he abounds in love for them. And, of course, the greatest example is Jesus himself, who gave his life for those He loved, the perfect fulfillment of John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

Somehow Paul relates the fulfilling of the instruction to love with a proper standing before God as "blameless in holiness." It is the clear teaching of Scripture that no one can stand in the presence of God on his own behalf. A holy and perfect God cannot be approached by anyone tainted by sin—and we all are (Romans 3:23). Paul refers to the "coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints," an event to occur when Jesus returns to establish His promised kingdom on earth. The saints who return with Him will have been saved by His grace and clothed in His righteousness (Revelation 19:8). At that point they will be blameless and holy. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that when the Christian demonstrates God-like love toward others, he is giving evidence of his genuine conversion, a born-again experience that, by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, presents him holy and blameless before God.

Paul then moves in chapter 4 to admonish the brethren. He does so "in the Lord Jesus," that is on the authority of Jesus. Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit in the writing of the epistles (see 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21), so his exhortation can rightly be said to be the Word of God. He encourages them "to walk and please God" as they had been instructed by him (v. 1). He commends them for doing so, "just as you actually do." It's easy to accept someone's admonition and instruction, when he also commends you for how you are responding. Of course, while they had done well, they could still do better, so he challenges them "that you excel still more." Christians should always seek to excel—not to be better than others, but to improve for the glory of God.

Paul's final statement in this passage is a reminder that he is not speaking for himself or on his own authority. He is speaking "by the authority of the Lord Jesus." The Christian should never read God's Word without the full realization that, whoever the human author, these are the words and instructions that God has given, and they must be obeyed out of love and gratefulness for His having providing the way for us to have an intimate relationship with Him by faith.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The New Testament begins with four Gospels, stories of the good news of Jesus' incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and return to heaven. Why four Gospels? you might ask. While they all generally cover the same story, they offer a variety of events, stories, and sayings of Jesus. They give them from different perspectives, and together we get a more complete picture of the truth. Luke acknowledges in his opening paragraph that there were many stories about Jesus, but he had a particular story to tell. While the others may present Jesus as king and Messiah (Matthew), or a servant to man (Mark), or as the Son of God (John), Luke emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human.

Luke's audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He affirmed that what those early Christians had been taught was indeed true and trustworthy. Like Matthew, Luke records significant teachings of Jesus regarding end times. He shows that Jesus did not teach that His return would be immediate; rather there was to be an indeterminate time between His resurrection and the second coming. But Jesus is to return in bodily form. The Apostle Paul writes later to clarify certain misunderstandings about end times, also. (See 1 & 2 Thessalonians.)

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title He frequently uses to speak of himself).

Gospel Reading:

Note: Verses 29 – 33 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Luke 21:25-36 NAS95 25 "There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, 26 men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 "Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN A CLOUD with power and great glory. 28 "But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

29 Then He told them a parable: "Behold the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. 31 "So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near. 32 "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place. 33 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

34 "Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; 35 for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. 36 "But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Immediately preceding the return of Christ, there will be signs and wonders in the heavens. In a parallel passage (Matthew 24:29), quoting from the Old Testament prophets, it is said that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." As might be expected, the text tells us that there will be dismay among the nations on the earth and men will faint from fear. That fear is the result not only of the fearsome celestial events but from the expectation of things that are yet to come. It is not difficult to image the rampant terror on the earth when "the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

It is then that the Lord Jesus will return to earth. "The Son of Man coming in a cloud" is a quotation from Daniel 7:13 in which the prophet also writes of the glory and dominion that is to be given Messiah at that time. The careful Bible student may recall that 40 days after His resurrection Jesus ascended to heaven "and a cloud received him" (Acts 1:9). Luke is also the writer of the Book of Acts, and he went on to record the words of the angels at the ascension. They said, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

Jesus warns His hearers that they must be prepared for the day of His return, even though that date has not been revealed. When the signs begin to appear, it's a warning to the faithful to look beyond the frightful circumstances and anticipate their final redemption. Redemption is a significant term regarding the believer in Christ. He has been lost in his sin and, as a result, separated from God. But in God's grace and out of His unending love, He has provided a way for the sinner to be redeemed—to be bought with a price and restored to God. That price, of course, is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross where He paid the infinite penalty of sin.

Jesus broke into the narrative to tell a story about trees. When trees sprout leaves in the spring, you can begin to anticipate the fruit they will produce in the fall. Parables are stories that use the common elements of life to illustrate spiritual truth in language anyone can understand. Jesus makes the application. As buds on trees anticipate a harvest, so the signs of the times anticipate the culmination of God's plan in the return of Jesus and the establishment of His eternal kingdom on earth. The last statement in the paragraph is the wonderful affirmation that God's Word is eternally true. But the sentence preceding that has been difficult for Christians to understand. What did Jesus mean when He said, "This generation will not pass until all things take place"? Obviously, it cannot mean the generation to which Jesus was speaking. They're gone, and the predicted events have not yet occurred. It may be best to understand that Jesus was likely referring to the generation that would be alive when the predicted signs actually occur.

The passage concludes with additional warnings to the believers who will be alive when the signs of the end times appear. They are to be prepared so the events don't fall on them like an unexpected "trap." These events, Jesus says, will come upon every living person at that time; none can escape. He is specific in his warnings. They must "be on guard," and he names the dangers to avoid: "dissipation" (harmful self-indulgence) and its frequent companion "drunkenness." A third is more subtle, "the worries of life." Elsewhere Jesus had taught that His followers need not be concerned about such things: clothing, food, and so forth. God is faithful to provide for His own when their trust is in Him (Matthew 6:25-34). In those last days, Christ-followers must be giving their attention to spiritual and eternal matters rather than mere physical and temporal concerns.

The final admonition for those living in the end times is to be "on the alert at all times." That includes praying for the strength that only God can give in perilous times. Only He can enable His children to escape all the terrible events of those last days. In doing so, they will one day stand before "the Son of Man," to worship Him and to receive the crown of life that He has promised (James 1:12).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways are you trusting in your own efforts to please God or in the sacrifice of Jesus and His resurrection for your righteousness?

2. Describe how your life reflects the love of God in the way you act toward other Christians and to the people of the world?

3. In what ways are you heeding the warnings of Jesus so that you are "on guard" and "on the alert," as you anticipate the return of Jesus? List two ways in which you are doing this.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/112915.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-22-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **11-22-2015**. This week we will see the rulership of Jesus from three different angles in the readings from the Mass. The first reading is an Old Testament prophecy about His dominion and kingdom being an everlasting establishment. The second reading, from the book of Revelation in the New Testament, confirms the eternal dominion and power that Jesus has, but also adds a sense of personal tenderness towards us who believe in Him. The last reading, from the Gospel of John, chronicles the self-revelation of Jesus as King, recognizing that His kingdom was not of this world. Although his kingship was misunderstood and missed by many in His first advent, it will not be misunderstood at His second advent.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Daniel Chapter 7. The first six chapters of the Book record mostly historical events with some prophecy. However, as we move into chapter seven, Daniel records visions given to him from God concerning future events. These prophetic messages were given to Daniel by God during various times during his life. The context of Chapter 7 was a message given to Daniel "In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon" (Daniel 7:1), meaning it was before the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire by the Medo Persian forces under Cyrus the Great. There is some debate as to the identity of Belshazzar, who was most likely an overlord that reigned under the

authority of the King. In examining historical sources it is also likely that Belshazzar was either the son or grandson of the famous King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel's visions in the first 12 verses of chapter 7 are of four successive empires beginning with Babylon depicted by a lion (v 4). The second is Medo / Persia depicted by a bear. The third is the Greek Empire pictured by a leopard, King Alexander, with four wings picturing his four generals to whom his kingdom was divided after his fast and furious life. Finally, the last empire is a "dreadful and terrible beast" depicting both the Roman Empire in the shorter term and in the long term a restored Roman-like empire corresponding to Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation. Daniel said about this one, "After this I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrifying and extremely strong; and it had large iron teeth. It devoured and crushed and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns" (Daniel 7:7). Another ruler called the "little horn" (v. 8) will arise from among the last empire with a "mouth uttering great boasts" (v. 8f). This "little horn" was prefigured by King Antiochus IV Epiphanes who tormented the Jews in the third century BC as recorded in the book of 1 Maccabees. This "antichrist of the Old Testament" is a type of the person that will exist during the end times. This is the person spoken of in Revelation 13:2 – 10 with language very similar to that of the Prophet Daniel.

This introduction brings us to today's reading in which we see a vision in heaven that pictures the kingdom of Jesus being presented to Him by God the Father. At the end of the age after four world empires have controlled the world with the last one devouring the ones that came before it, God will finally claim the kingdom that is rightfully His after putting down the evil rulers that had come before.

First Reading:

Daniel 7:13-14 NAS95 13 "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. 14 And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed."

Daniel clearly saw a revelation of the Lord Jesus Who was to come, as Jesus used this same terminology in referring to Himself in Matthew 24:30, "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory." Jesus also called Himself the Son of Man in John 5:27. When Jesus returns to set up His kingdom on earth, "His dominion [will be] everlasting . . . [and] one which will not be destroyed."

From this passage in Daniel we find out a few very important details about the future that should inform us for our lives today. The first detail is the description of Jesus as the Son of Man. This was

Jesus' most common way of referring to himself as recorded in the Gospels. Why would He describe Himself as such (and not choose Son of God as His preferred self-reference)? It may be that He knew we would be able to revere Him as the divine Son of God, but realized that we may have trouble picturing Him as a man. Jesus' identity as fully God and fully man is a mystery to us, but is nonetheless important. As the second Adam, He fulfilled (as a man) the righteous requirements of the law (Romans 8:3-4), what the first Adam could not do. And in that, He provides salvation for us if we unite ourselves with Him. A second key point, is that Jesus is given dominion, glory and a kingdom for all people to serve Him. If this is the case for eternity (and this is good for us in the future), then our servanthood to Jesus the King should be good for us today. Some people agonize over the "sacrifice" it is to be a Christian. Well, really, the sacrifice is only toward the self-ruled life, which is destructive to our soul anyways. In reality, Jesus' is a good King, so when we let Him rule in our life each day, we are living the life we were designed to live. Jesus said that He came to bring life and that more abundantly (John 10:10). Can we trust Him to do this in us even now?

In these days of chaos before Jesus returns, we can look with confident hope that one day Jesus will return to set up His perfect kingdom on earth in fulfillment of this promise in Daniel. Jesus will take the dominion and kingdom back from Satan that was given to him for a short time (2 Corinthians 4:4), in light of eternity. As we encounter disturbing events in our world today, we can live with an eternal perspective which banks on the fact that God wins.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The reading is from the Book of Revelation. The context of the reading is the beginning of the Book, in which John introduces Jesus as the rightful Ruler of the earth in very similar language to what we just read from Daniel.

Second Reading:

Revelation 1:5-8 NAS95 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood– 6 and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father–to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

In the reading we see John's testimony about the identity of Jesus as "the faithful witness" (one who tells the truth and who's words are reliable, John 18:37); "firstborn of the dead" (the first and preeminent of all those who will rise from the dead, Romans 8:29); "ruler of the kings of the earth" (the highest power); the One "who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood" (He created a way for us to be made free from the slavery of sin and death by His great love, Romans 6:1-23);

and Who "made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father" (His goal is to make His followers into a united people group who serves God the Father with our lives) (vv. 5 – 6). In verse 7 we see the return of the Lord Jesus as we read in Daniel, the One Who will come in the clouds to fulfill the prophecy given by the angels in Acts 1:11 regarding how Jesus would return where they said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." Furthermore, John quoted from an important prophecy of Zechariah which predicted the ultimate acceptance of Jesus by His people the Jews. Zechariah predicted the events regarding Jesus return: "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn" (Zechariah 12:10). Finally, John describes Jesus as the first and last, the "Alpha and Omega," a statement which forms a bookend in the Book of Revelation where it is repeated in the closing section in Revelation 21:6 and 22:13. This is a way of saying that Jesus is A to Z and everything in between. He is everything we need.

We can be confident that one day Jesus will return to establish His rightful place on earth as the Ruler of the universe. He released us from our sins by His blood—a great sacrifice on His part. What a wonderful Savior. May we live in the freedom He has granted us, giving our lives back to Him as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint John chapter 18. The context is just after Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested in the garden across from the Kidron Valley (John 13:1). Jesus was bound and led first to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest that year (John 18:13). Annas was the one who had prophesied that it would be better for one man to die than for the rest of the nation to perish (John 18:14). Jesus was interrogated by Annas, with Peter following at a distance (vv. 15-17). Next, Jesus was led to Caiaphas the high priest (v. 24), then finally into the Praetorium where He appeared before Pontius Pilate. While Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish rulers, Pilate was the Roman ruler, who could sentence a prisoner to death.

Gospel Reading:

John 18:33-37 NAS95 33 Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" 35 Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." 37 Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a

king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

In the reading Jesus affirmed His rightful rulership of the world, although He had not yet established His kingdom on earth as it already was so in heaven. Jesus' kingdom was at this time a kingdom not on earth, but rather one in the hearts of the people who believed. Jesus said, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (v. 37). The subjects of His kingdom are those who come to Him in faith who follow His truth. As we see in 1 John, "We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him" (1 John 3:19). Just as Jesus' rulership and kingdom were mocked and discarded, we as His followers face similar persecution because of our belief in Him. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart, for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We must learn how to live in the tension of the now as we wait for the "not yet"—our future with Him. The fact that He endured the mistreatment of those in power gives us hope and strength to endure the mistreatment of the world as it mocks and marginalizes the Gospel message. These are opportunities to walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and be a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20), thus showing the veracity of Christ's rulership in our lives.

What does this mean for us today? The readings today have shown us that Jesus truly is the Alpha and Omega, the rightful ruler of the universe. One day He will return to His rightful place to rule and reign on the earth. Until then we can trust in the promise of His return and look forward to the salvation of our souls. Second, we can trust that once we believe in the Lord Jesus for our salvation and not in any "good" works that we do (Ephesians 2:8-9) we can have assurance that we have eternal life. God tells us that if we believe, then we can presume that we have eternal life. "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). Finally, we as we continue to study and understand the prophecies about Jesus' return, we can begin to see the events of the world taking shape as Jesus' coming becomes more imminent. These events should not cause us alarm but rather give motivation to expand our ministry efforts to reach lost people with the saving message of the Gospel.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. There were several descriptions of Jesus that were shared in the Mass passages this week. Take some time and reflect on one or two from the list below and make a connection between the description and how that can impact your perspective:

- Ruler of an everlasting Kingdom
- Son of Man
- Faithful witness
- First born of the dead
- Ruler of the kings of the earth
- The one who loves us and released us from sin by his blood

- The one who made us to be a kingdom
- The one who made us to be priests, to serve God
- The one who was pierced
- The Alpha and Omega
- The one who is and was and is to come
- The King of the Jews
- The one who's kingdom is not of this world, but of another realm

2. If Jesus is King, how is His kingship displayed in your life? Are there ways that you are intentionally surrendering your self-rule in order to be ruled by Him? What areas does His kingship make sense in your life and motivate you to order your life around His values and priorities? Take time to reaffirm your desire to see Jesus' will override your self-will. What areas of your life need to be surrendered to His kingship? Take time to confess these areas of resistance to His rightful reign and ask Him to help you surrender, even in these war zones.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/112215.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-15-2015

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **11-15-2015**. This week we open with a reading from Daniel 12 in which we study the combined event known as the rapture of the church, the return of the Lord, and the resurrection of the dead. Then we examine in the second reading how Jesus died for our sins once and for all, which is so much superior than the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament that had to be repeated twice a day and never took away the people's sins. Finally we close with another view of the same event described in the first reading from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Daniel, chapter 12. The context of the message is a prophecy about the end of the world as we know it when the man of sin, known as the Antichrist, rules the world. The Antichrist will be in power when God pours out His final judgments on the earth and Jesus returns to reign on earth. The reading today describes the resurrection of the dead, some of whom go to eternal life with God and others go to eternal damnation. Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS'" (Matthew 7:22-23).

The reading from Daniel promises that the people of God will be "rescued" from this time of unprecedented distress. In the New Testament, we have further corroboration of this, which Saint Paul calls the "rapture," where the Lord Jesus comes to take His church to heaven before God pours the judgments chronicled in the Book of Revelation (see especially Revelation 16:1, the "seven bowls

of the wrath of God"). We will read more about this later in the Gospel lesson regarding the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), a very dark time for those left on the earth after Jesus' return for His church. The "catching up" of the church to heaven was predicted by Saint Paul in response to someone in Thessalonica who had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17) as follows. "*15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 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. 17 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.*" Paul reassured the believers that the Lord's return will be very obvious and recognizable. No one will "miss it." This corresponds to the teaching in Daniel 12, which is the focus of the first reading.

First Reading:

Daniel 12:1-3 NAS95 1 "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

The reading opens with the phrase, "Now at that time" (v. 1a). The previous verses in Daniel 11, chronicle a time of wars and violence that will consume the earth. This will bring in a "time of distress" that is referred to later in the verse. Michael, one of only two angels mentioned by name in the Bible who follow God, will somehow superintend the activity during this time. As we said in previous studies, the time leading up to this event will be a time of increasing and terrible persecution of God's people. Although a small remnant of Jews will be divinely sealed for God's protection throughout this time (Revelation 7:4-8), the Antichrist will pursue Christians with great vengeance just before the Lord returns and "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (v. 2). Saint John said in Revelation, "So the dragon was enraged with the woman (Israel), and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Christians)" (Revelation 12:17 with parenthetical explanations added). Verse two says that "many" will rise, meaning not everyone, but many people have yet to die on the earth. The exception to this is that the believers who are alive at that time will be taken up to be with the Lord. "*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" (1Th 4:16-17).

During this time "everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." What is this book? The book that Daniel refers to is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Philippians 4:3 says that people who labored by Paul's side had their names written in the book of life. Revelation 3:5 shares a promise to those who overcome, that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. Revelation 20:12 describes two books, one that has all the deeds of every person (implying judgment for misdeeds) and another book, the book of life, which if one's name is written there, will cancel out the judgment recorded in the other book. Revelation 20:15 says: "And if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 21:27 describes it as the Lamb's book of life and says that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter the New Jerusalem, God's eternal heaven. The Bible makes it very clear that the book of life is a place that records those who are going to be saved from the eternal lake of fire, the just consequences for those who live contrary to God and apart from His life. How does one know if his or her name is written in the book of life? Another way to ask the same question based on the passage in Daniel: how can we know which group we are in, the ones who will rise to everlasting life or those who rise to disgrace and everlasting contempt? Once we recognize that we are a sinner, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we can turn our hearts to the Lord Jesus as the only remedy. The Bible tells us that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1a), and later John said, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:12). Further it says, "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" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Salvation is a free gift that comes about **only** by belief in Jesus Christ, it can never be earned. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you have put your faith in Jesus to save you, then you can have assurance that you will be "rescued" from eternal disgrace and contempt.

Daniel also explains that the people "who have insight" and who "lead the many to righteousness" will be prominent in the eternal kingdom of God, shining brightly "like the stars forever and ever" (v. 3c). Being involved in gaining wisdom and pointing others to deeper faith in Christ is a valuable focus for our lives. You may have a ministry of evangelism, introducing people to a relationship with Jesus. Or you may have a ministry of discipleship, helping those who have put their faith in Jesus grow in their new life in Christ. Either way, it is important to continue growing in your own faith to have insight and to be equipped to lead others to righteousness.

Interestingly, God gave us a glimpse into a precursor to the resurrection of the dead which happened at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. He is the only one of the four writers that recorded this event. Matthew said that after Jesus had given up His life on the cross, "The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised;

and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:52-53). This is one example of how powerful God is and is evidence of the deity of Christ.

What does this reading mean for us today? First, if anyone is sitting on the fence regarding Jesus as Lord, today is the day to trust in Him. Saint Paul said, "*AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). As Peter told the people in Jerusalem about Jesus, "*He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Second, although we as Christians should expect increasing persecution leading up to Jesus' return, we can take hope that Jesus will fulfill His promise to return "in the same way in which [they] saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Finally, we can have confidence in the fact that God's mighty angelic beings are fighting the spiritual battle against the demonic forces allied against us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading is from Hebrews chapter 10, a treatise on how Jesus died one time for sins forever, which means this sacrifice can never be repeated. At this time, the Hebrew people were still conducting the Old Testament sacrifices required by the Law. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer provides a running contrast to the old manner of things compared to Jesus. The verdict is that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, and greater than the sacrificial system. In this reading, we see a culminating point of the author's conclusion that Jesus is greater than the priestly system of the Old Testament.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 15 – 16 which were omitted from the reading were included below.

Hebrews 10:11-18 NAS95 11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

The author said that by "one offering He has perfected [forever] those who are sanctified" (v. 14). The word once follows a string of uses of this same word that first appears in this context in chapter 7: "For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He died once for all when He offered up Himself" (Hebrews 7:26-27). To make his point that Jesus died once for sins forever, in contrast to the sacrifices offered repeatedly by the Levitical priests, the author continued repeating this word four more times before today's reading, and twice more in the actual reading. The author presented extremely compelling evidence as to the importance of understanding the concept of Jesus' single sacrifice for sins forever. He said, "[H]aving offered one sacrifice for sins for all time," (v. 12) then again he said in verse 14, "For by one offering." Interestingly the phrase indicating Jesus' single sacrifice is repeated seven times between the end of chapter seven and today's reading in chapter 10. Anytime the Bible repeats something we need to pay special attention to it, and especially if the concept is repeated seven times! The reading clearly tells us, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (v. 18). The only thing that can take away our sin is Jesus willingly sacrificing His life as a Victor on the cross for our sins (see John 10:18).

What does this mean for our life? The value of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins is of inestimable value. Compared with the sacrificial system of the Jews about which God said "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4), Jesus' single sacrificial giving of Himself as a Victor on the cross provided the means for believers in Him to be reconciled to God forever. Jesus will never have to offer Himself as a sacrifice again, ever. When we celebrate communion we look back at His finished work on the cross. This was always God's plan, as Jesus was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). When we break the bread of communion and drink from the cup, we remember the body that he allowed to be broken for us and His blood poured out as the final offering for sin forever (1 Corinthians 11:26). We do not need to work for our salvation, for Jesus' work on the cross is finished (John 19:30). I'll end this with one last exclamation point, for Jesus has "appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"(Hebrews 9:26)! What a wonderful savior!

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will return to eschatology (pronounced es·ka·tol·a·gee), a word that means the study of the last things. The events in the reading will sound very familiar from your study in the first reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson from Mark 13 is from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse. The parallel passage in Matthew 24 goes into some greater details than that of Mark's account. The context of the message is after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the temple from the money changers during the preparation for the Passover. Upon the disciples telling Jesus about the

"wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings" (Mark 13:1) of the temple complex, Jesus told them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down" (verse 2). Afterwards Peter, James, John and Andrew approached Jesus privately and asked Him, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled" (v. 4). Jesus then explained to them what was to come, including many deceivers (Matthew 13:6), "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 13:7), famines and earthquakes (Matthew 13:8), yet these were just the beginning of the times of the end (v. 8). Then would come persecution (Matthew 13:9, 11), including death (v. 12), and the spread of the Gospel to the extent of the known world (v. 10, with final fulfillment in Revelation 14:6). After the "beginning of the birth pains" (v. 8e), the Antichrist will be revealed and bring an end to the restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem (Matthew 13:14). Although this prophecy was partially fulfilled by the Roman general Titus during the siege of Jerusalem during AD 70, the text is clear that another siege is in sight since Jesus warning is a global one, not just a local one concerning the city of Jerusalem. He said, "if the Lord had not cut short the days no human being would be saved" (v. 20). This and the corresponding testimony in the Book of Revelation make it clear that these events are yet future. This brings us up to today's reading which details events which begin after or during the unveiling of the first six seals in the Book of Revelation. The "gathering of the elect" (v. 27) about which we will read is the same event that we studied in the first reading from Daniel 12.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 13:24-32 NAS95 24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

The opening verse of the reading is nearly the same as what John described with the opening of the sixth seal in the Book of Revelation. "*12 I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places*" (Revelation 6:12-14). In the time just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus, the world will experience miraculous cosmic signs revealing God's power (vv. 24 – 25). At some point during the mid-point of a seven year period counting from a peace treaty made with

Jerusalem to settle the worldwide chaos surrounding control over that tiny but religiously important region, Jesus Christ "will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds" (v. 27). While there is much speculation about the sequence of events, this is the event we discussed in the first reading that, in my opinion, includes the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54), the return of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:11), and the resurrection of the dead up until that time (Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29). Beyond this point the period known as the Great Tribulation or the Day of the Lord will commence during which God will bring an end to the Antichrist's religious and commercial systems of mystery Babylon and Babylon the Great (Revelation 18). Although we don't yet understand what form this Babylon will take, we know that it will exalt itself against God much in the same way as the people did with the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

As the reading continued, Jesus explained to His disciples how to discern the signs of the times by telling them the parable of the fig tree. In the same way that they could discern the ripeness of the fig tree and that the summer was near they would also be able to discern that the end times were at their doorstep when the signs He gave them were at hand. He told them that once people (not necessarily them) saw these signs that the current generation would see the whole process completed during their lifetime (v. 30). Finally, through the mystery of the functions of the Three Persons of the Godhead, Jesus explained that the timing of the events was known only to God the Father (v. 32).

What does all of this talk about the horrible events of the end times mean to us today? Jesus calls us to live with an expectation of His imminent return. We are to be good stewards of the gifts that He has given to us. He said in Matthew's retelling of the Olivet Discourse, "*For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes*" (Matthew 24:44-46). We too must learn to discern the times by studying the imminent signs that will precede the return of the Lord, as you did today. Although the study of the end times may seem daunting, the Bible lays out a clear pattern of events that people alive during that time should expect to see. As time marches closer and closer to the fulfillment of these events, we should expect to see the "beginning of birth pains" described in Mark 13:8. We must expect to be persecuted on an increasing level for our faith, even to the point of death. The point of Jesus' teaching about His imminent return was to provide us with comfort that He is not far away, and He will return soon in fulfillment of His promises to us and to Israel. Saint Paul said, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) regarding the catching up of the church to heaven.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What do you find comforting about the words from the first and third readings? How can you encourage and challenge others with your faith in Jesus' imminent return?

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2. When you think about the fact that Jesus has paid fully for your sin debt, what inner response does this evoke? What outer response seems fitting for you to reflect this reality in your life this week? How can you live in light of this reality?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/111515.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-8-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **11-8-2015**. This week we open with a story from 1

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

Read Online:http://www.christiansforchrist.org/articles/weekly-study-notes-for-the-sunday-mass/11-08-2015

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

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

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

Elijah prophesied, "*As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word*." In the ensuing drought, God miraculously

provided food for Elijah. One of the ways He did this was through an unlikely source–a poor widow woman.

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

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

belongings) to be the provision for that need. The widow did not fear to give all she had. We don't need to fear either.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

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

Second Reading:

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

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

need for any other.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

2. Do a heart check this week. Are you practicing your religion to impress people or as an expression of sincere devotion from the heart?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/110815.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-1-2015

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **11-1-2015**. This week we open with a reading from the mysterious Book of Revelation where we will explain in detail some of the background and context to bring out the meaning of the text. Then we move to another reading written by John from the Book of First John. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew from the section called the Beatitudes. I remember reading those passages many years ago in Mass and feeling that I needed to be a better person and to try harder to please God. Find out what God's Word says about my feelings and what would have been a more biblical response to them.

I know someone that has been a Christian for a very long time while a certain uncle of hers was resistant to believing in Jesus Christ right up until near the end of his life. As he grew older, he steadfastly refused to bow his knee to Jesus Christ although almost everyone around him were followers of Jesus including his niece who told me the story, and her husband was a pastor. One night he went to bed expecting to awaken the next morning just like every other day. However, God had a different plan for him. As I was a new believer in Jesus Christ myself when I heard this story I remember how it profoundly impacted me as I listened with baited breath about what was going to happen next. The next morning when the man arose and looked at himself in the mirror, he found a depression in the bone of his forehead in the shape of a cross. He instantly recognized this as a miracle as a seal of God calling him to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ which he quickly obeyed. As others encountered him throughout the last years of his life, he testified of God's grace in marking him in this unique way such that he could no longer deny the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. This marking remained on his forehead for the rest of his life as a seal or marking of him as a follower of Jesus Christ. This week we will read about how God will in some future day "seal" a group of Jews in order to protect them from the wrath of the Antichrist who like many others before him will persecute God's chosen people.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Revelation. This Book tells the story of the unfurling of a series of judgments upon the world culminating with what the Old Testament calls the "Day of the Lord." Throughout the Book, John moves his focus back and forth from events happening upon the earth and those in heaven with frequent parenthesis (or pauses) in the chronological progression of events. Understanding of Revelation requires a thorough understanding of the Old Testament and especially the Book of Daniel. John uses much symbolic language throughout the Book, and the reader is challenged to understand the meaning behind the symbols as well as to what extent the language is meant to foretell literal events in heaven and on the earth.

In order to understand the Book of Revelation and today's reading, it is necessary to understand from a high level the primary events that will transpire during the end times. The order of the main events that will unfold are as follows. The sin of the world will grow worse and worse (Matthew 24;12), and many false christs will come. (2 Timothy 3:13, Matthew 24:5). The world will be consumed by "wars and rumors of wars," there will be "famines and earthquakes" (Matthew 24:6-7). This will mark the beginning of the end times. (Matthew 24:8) The AntiChrist will come on the scene and falsely claim to have been resurrected from the dead (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, Revelation 13:3). A peace treaty will be made with Israel providing for resumption of animal sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:27). Large-scale persecution of believers will escalate leading many false believers to fall away (Revelation 13:7, Matthew 13:9-10). This point marks the unfurling of the scroll of the first six seals of Revelation. As the AntiChrist rules the world with terror, at some point the believers in God will be reunited with Christ and taken to heaven at His second coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18). Somewhere during this time a group of elect Jews will be protected by God as described in today's reading. The final stage will then begin with the unbelieving world left behind and then God will unleash His judgments during the final "Day of the Lord" completing the total destruction of the AntiChrist's worldly and religious empire of mystery Babylon. This is the time when God unleashes His judgments upon the world as stated just prior to today's reading in Revelation 6:17, "for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand." At the conclusion of these events, Jesus will return to set up His reign on earth.

The particular context of today's reading in chapter 7 is the divine protection of a believing remnant of Jews alive during the time when the AntiChrist will be unleashing increasing persecution upon believers in God. God will protect this surviving remnant in order to complete His promises to them.

First Reading:

Note: Verses 5 – 8 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Revelation 7:2-14 NAS95 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted

to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed. 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10 and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." 13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

In the days before Jesus' return (see Acts 1:11), a powerful world ruler will emerge called the AntiChrist who will persecute any believers alive during this time including both Christians and Jews. As the AntiChrist hurls his bloodshed upon the Christians, God will protect a remnant of the Jews who through this terrible persecution will come to faith in the Lord Jesus (Zechariah 12:10). To do this God grants His authority to an angel to set His mark upon this group of Jews from the twelve tribes of Israel – except that some of them were designated by different names because of the curses pronounced in the Old Testament. (Astute readers can find out more information about this by studying Deuteronomy 29:16-10). In ancient days, the kings used their signet ring to emboss a special marking into wax or clays seals that were placed upon documents in order to show their sign of authority and authenticity. In the last days of the devils reign over his current world empire, the angel of God's divine marking provides protection to the believing Jews from the wrath of the AntiChrist. The Prophet Malachi said about this, "I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). Whether this is a literal number of people or it is symbolic of a large but finite number isn't readily discernible in the text. However, they will have been regathered for the opening of the rebuilt temple and the resumption of the sacrifices. During the first three and half years of the peace treaty that the AntiChrist makes with national Israel, the Jews will resume their sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem while large scale persecution of Christians accelerates around the world. As time moves to the midpoint of this treaty, the AntiChrist will set an image of himself up in the temple and command his worship as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). This "abomination of desolation" (Matthew 24:15) will greatly provoke the Jews to rebel against the AntiChrist to such an extent that without God's divine protection all of them would be consumed by this evil end time

ruler. It is only through this horrific series of events that unfold upon the earth that the collective group of the Jews will finally recognize Jesus Whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10) as their Messiah.

As the reading continues, beginning in verse 9 John changed his focus from events happening on earth to things occurring in heaven. This is one of the frequent parenthesis that occurs throughout the Book. John saw a second group of people, a "great multitude which no one could count," (v. 9) who are believing people martyred up until that point during the great tribulation. John didn't understand who these people were at first, but the angel answered his question about them by describing how they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14). It's not often when someone can wash their robes in blood and make them white, but that is exactly what Jesus offers to anyone who trusts in Him. Although the believers in heaven were not delivered **from** the tribulation and persecution on earth, they were delivered **through** it to be with Jesus in heaven.

What does this mean for us today? We as Christians must expect that as God's prophets we will increasingly face persecution. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Later in the Gospel reading we will see how Jesus likened the persecution of believers to the persecution of the prophets that came before them (Matthew 5:12). There Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile against you and persecute you." As God's persecuted prophets we can look for our fulfillment not in the things of the world but look heavenward towards our ultimate purpose in serving God. Finally, as we continue to march onwards towards the last days described in Revelation, we can expect to see a growing distinction between the true people of God and the rest of the world. The Prophet Malachi said about these days, "Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve Him" (Malachi 3:18). Although we may not be saved from tribulation, we can be assured that God will deliver us through it.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First John. The context is Saint John's teaching on the characteristics of true believers, something that we will encounter later in the Gospel lesson.

Second Reading:

1 John 3:1-3 NAS95 1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

John said that God has so loved love those that believe in Him that He calls them His children (v. 1). Nonbelievers do not understand believers because they cannot know God and didn't know His Son

Jesus (v. 1d-ff). During our mortal lives as believers, we do not yet understand what we will become when we either get to heaven or meet Jesus when he returns to regather His church as we talked about in the first reading (v. 2). When we do finally meet Jesus our eyes will be opened, and we will see Him for what He truly is without the veil of sin covering our minds. Finally, we have hope that God will bring these things about. While living with an eternal focus as true believers we strive to become more and more like Jesus by leaning upon God's power that He has placed within us. As we become more pure by maturing in our walk with Jesus, we become more like the true believers described by John in the reading. This provides an excellent lead-in to the Gospel lesson in which Jesus lists some of the qualities of people whose lives have been transformed by God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount because of the location from which Jesus addressed the crowd in Galilee. The context is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry just after His temptation in the desert for forty days and the calling of the first disciples including Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus was beginning to draw large crowds and was telling the people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). This is the beginning of a much longer discourse that spans Matthew Chapters 5 through 7.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 5:1-12 NAS95 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

In this reading, Jesus announced a total of nine blessings, each opening with "Blessed are." Jesus is fulfilling the role of Prophet by providing a series of blessings, a word which means "happy." This contrasts with the usual words given by the Old Testament prophets who announced a series of curses and woes against those who refused to follow God. Jesus came to announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and this is what the kingdom looks like. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of new things that people have to do in order to be right with God, but rather it is a list of defining qualities of people who have been transformed by God.

Jesus is redefining the blessed life. Think about how these traits contrast how the world defines blessing. Someone living the blessed life:

1. Is poor in spirit, meaning humble which leads a person to recognize their spiritual need for God.
2. Mourns, meaning they recognize that this world is not their home and looks to God for comfort.
3. Exhibits gentleness, meaning they don't have to be aggressive to get things done because their heart is established in Christ's power.
4. Hungers and thirsts for righteousness meaning they prioritize eternal things over finite satisfaction in the world.
5. Shows mercy, because they were offered mercy themselves through the forgiveness given them by God and can extend it to others.
6. Is pure in heart, meaning they are not entangled with the evil ways of the world including lying, deceiving and manipulating people in order to get their own way.
7. Is a peacemaker, not just someone who tries to keep the peace at all costs. They actively seek peaceful solutions even in difficult situations which forces them to rely upon God more deeply.
8. Endures persecution with a vision toward eternity knowing that it is better to suffer than to succumb to temptation to compromise.
9. Endures insult because of their proclamation of truth (Word of God) just like happened to the prophets.

In summary, Jesus raised the bar of understanding to show the people that righteousness was not a bunch of behaviors that came by trying harder, but rather were qualities of the heart that were only possible through God's transforming power. These nine traits are the result of being born from above (John 3:3). Instead of being depressed that we can never be this good, Jesus delivered this sermon in order to invite us into a new way of life. This new way of life recognizes that our self-righteousness is as filthy rags before the LORD (Isaiah 64:6). We must come to the place where we receive Christ's righteousness into our hearts as a substitute for our former way of life (Romans 3:21-22).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How do you respond internally when you read the Sermon on the Mount? Does it feel like another list of impossible feats that you must accomplish in order to win God's favor? Or, have you responded to Jesus' invitation to life in the kingdom (where He is the King of your heart), and the Sermon on the Mount is a reflection of the work that He is doing in your life? If your response is more the former, that this is another list of impossible feats, you can turn to God in prayer and ask Him to give you His life from above and so be born anew.

2. In the first reading we read about how God appointed an angel to "seal" a group of Jews during

the end times in order to protect them from the events that were going to unfold as described in the seven seals of Revelation. In what ways are you already "sealed" by God through your faith in Jesus Christ?

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/110115.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

I know someone that has been a Christian for a very long time while a certain uncle of hers was resistant to believing in Jesus Christ right up until near the end of his life. As he grew older, he steadfastly refused to bow his knee to Jesus Christ although almost everyone around him were followers of Jesus including his niece who told me the story, and her husband was a pastor. One night he went to bed expecting to awaken the next morning just like every other day. However, God had a different plan for him. As I was a new believer in Jesus Christ myself when I heard this story I remember how it profoundly impacted me as I listened with baited breath about what was going to happen next. The next morning when the man arose and looked at himself in the mirror, he found a depression in the bone of his forehead in the shape of a cross. He instantly recognized this as a miracle as a seal of God calling him to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ which he quickly obeyed. As others encountered him throughout the last years of his life, he testified of God's grace in marking him in this unique way such that he could no longer deny the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. This marking remained on his forehead for the rest of his life as a seal or marking of him as a follower of Jesus Christ. This week we will read about how God will in some future day "seal" a group of Jews in order to protect them from the wrath of the Antichrist who like many others before him will persecute God's chosen people.

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-25-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **10-25-2015**. This week we open with a message of hope from the Prophet Jeremiah. The application is that although we as believers sin God will ultimately fulfill all of His promises to us including restoration and life with Him in a perfect kingdom. In the second reading from Hebrews, we examine Jesus' intercession for us as our eternal High Priest. We conclude the lesson with Mark's story about Jesus' healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from chapter 31 of the Book of Jeremiah. In Books like Jeremiah that combine history and prophecy, understanding the context is crucial to interpreting the text. In the reading Jeremiah finds himself in the midst of the aftermath of the first two exiles of the people of Judah to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The third and final deportation and destruction of Jerusalem is on the near horizon at which time Jeremiah will find himself carried to Babylon with an intermediate stop along the way in Egypt. In the first and second deportations in 605 and 597 BC, the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel respectively were carried to Babylon to continue their prophetic writings from that far away country. Two chapters before today's reading Jeremiah brought a message of hope to the two previously exiled groups from Judah (the Southern Kingdom) in Babylon. God's instructions to the people through Jeremiah were to live normally and fruitfully in that distant land. They were to "Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce" and "Take wives and

become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease" (Jeremiah 29:5.6). The Jews living as exiles in Babylon were to "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare" (v. 7).

First Reading:

Jeremiah 31:7-9 NAS95 7 For thus says the LORD, "Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, And shout among the chief of the nations; Proclaim, give praise and say, 'O LORD, save Your people, The remnant of Israel.' 8 "Behold, I am bringing them from the north country, And I will gather them from the remote parts of the earth, Among them the blind and the lame, The woman with child and she who is in labor with child, together; A great company, they will return here. 9 "With weeping they will come, And by supplication I will lead them; I will make them walk by streams of waters, On a straight path in which they will not stumble; For I am a father to Israel, And Ephraim is My firstborn."

Jeremiah spoke as God's anointed prophet to the southern tribes of Judah and therefore the reading begins with, "For thus says the LORD" (v. 7a). God had warned the people over and over again that unless they repented He would send them into captivity to atone for their sin. This message of hope was important to the exiles but Jeremiah continued his warnings to Judah that unless they repented God would take the rest of the people captive and destroy the city of Jerusalem along with the temple. The message in today's reading is one of hope to all of the exiles that God would one day restore them back to the land. It also provides hope to the exiles of the Northern Kingdom taken back in 722 BC by the Assyrians, although the message was written to Judah. The reading continues Jeremiah's proclamation about this future restoration. Just prior to this Jeremiah told the people, "For behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel and Judah.' The LORD says, 'I will also bring them back to the land that I gave to their forefathers and they shall possess it.'" (Jeremiah 30:3). Although the third and final exile had not yet happened, this message of hope was written to all of the exiles, as it was a foregone conclusion.

Jeremiah's message concerned hope in the future restoration of the people of Judah to the land. He said that the people "gather[ed] from the remote parts of the earth . . . A great company, they will return here" (v. 7). Although King Nebuchadnezzar had already deported two large groups from Judah to Babylon, the final destruction was due to come very soon with the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Interestingly, God included the Northern Kingdom in this message about the future regathering and restoration of the Israelite people by mentioning "Ephraim is My firstborn" (v. 9). The Prophet Daniel, who was the first to be exiled to Babylon, said concerning the Southern Kingdom that the period of time which they would be held captive after this final event would be seventy years (Daniel 9:24). After these "seventy sevens" of years, Daniel said that a

decree would be issued and that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and restored (Daniel 9:25). Jeremiah said the same thing just two chapters before the reading. "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jeremiah 29:10). Ultimately, with the mention of Ephraim and a universal regathering of the Jews we must look to the future restoration of the entire kingdom of Israel under the reign of Jesus Christ that will happen upon His return. The big idea is that although the people had sinned, God would forgive their sin and complete the promises that He had made to them to inherit all of the Promised Land. The terms of His promises to them were confirmed in the various covenants. Although many of God's promises to Israel were tied to their inheritance of material blessings such as the land, the Bible is full of spiritual promises to them including salvation through their future Savior.

The application of Jeremiah's message for us today is that although "all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)," "if confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We, like the Jews, continually miss the mark. We share in the message of hope that God will complete all of the promises that He has made to us. We cannot make the mistake as some have done by claiming the church has replaced Israel and that since God has forsaken Israel the church will inherit the promises that God made to them. Instead, God will make good both on His promises to Israel and on the promises He made to the church. *For more about God's promises to the church refer to the first study question.*

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Chapter 5 of the Book of Hebrews. The overall message of the Book is the contrast between the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant was incomplete and imperfect in the sense that it came through the Levitical priesthood that was passing away because of its connection to mortal high priests. In contrast, the New Covenant is proffered through the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ who is in the line of Melchizedek. This theme comes out very clearly in today's reading.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 5:1-6 NAS95 1 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; 2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; 3 and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. 4 And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was. 5 So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU"; 6 just as He says also in another passage, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK."

The author explained how God in the Old Testament appointed the mortal, weak and misguided high

priests of the Levitical line (Aaron) in order not only to offer sacrifices for other people but also for themselves (v. 3). In contrast, God the Father appointed Christ as our eternal High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, not Aaron (v. 6). It's important to understand the [KS1] man named Melchizedek mentioned in verse 5. The first time we find Melchizedek in the Bible is in Genesis 14:17-20 where we find him bringing out bread and wine to greet Abraham who was returning from battle with the forces that kidnapped his nephew Lot. Hebrews 7:1 says about this, "Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him." Looking at the book of Hebrews as a whole you can see that it's grounded in an explanation of Christ through the perspective of the Levitical Old Testament priesthood, thus the title given to the book "Hebrews" meaning Jews (see Genesis 14:3 where Abram, later called Abraham, the father of the Jews, is called a Hebrew). We see there in Hebrews 7:1 that Melchizedek is three things: 1. the king of Salem, the area we now identify as Jerusalem, 2. A priest of the "Most High God," meaning a priest of the *only* true God, and 3. one to whom Abraham the father of the Jews gave tribute. Today's reading said that Christ is of the "order of Melchizedek (v. 5), which is a quote from Psalms 110:4. According to the Book of Leviticus, all of the Old Testament Priests had to come from the tribe of Levi, but Melchizedek was a priest before the Law even existed! Yet Abraham gave a tenth portion (or tithe) to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:4) as required under the later Law for all priests (verse 5). What is being explained here is that Melchizedek was one of a class of priests that foreshadowed the coming final, eternal High Priest, Jesus. Melchizedek, whose name means King of righteousness, could not have come from the line of Aaron (Levi) or Judah, because these did not exist during his lifetime. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the final sacrifice was Jesus' own death on the cross which did away with the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 10:11-14). Jesus was from the "order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4, Hebrews 7:17), not the line of Aaron. This is new order is made even more clear by reading beyond the quoted section of Psalm 110 to verse 7, "Therefore He will lift up his head." This eternal priest Jesus of the non-priestly line of Judah is and will be exalted by God. Melchizedek was the first biblical personality to picture the reality of a priest/king.

There are numerous implications for our lives relative to Jesus as The High Priest according to the line of Melchizedek. Jesus' ministry to us as the only intercessor between us and the Father (1 Timothy 2:5) is eternal. Second, we will never be subject to the frailties of a human priesthood because Jesus replaced the Levitical Priesthood forever. Since Jesus lived as a Man on earth, He can identify with the things that trouble us in this life. "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus provides all who believe in Him with hope that one day our human weakness will be removed and we will be restored to a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark 10 and follows James and John's request to "Grant that we may sit,

one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory" (Mark 10:37). Jesus taught them that they would suffer for Him, but it was not for them to choose their position as this was up to the will of His Father (Matthew 10:38-40). This discussion caused the other ten disciples to "feel indignant with James and John" (v. 41). Next, on their way to Jerusalem they stopped along the way in Jericho.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 10:46-52 NAS95 46 Then they came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him here." So they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you." 50 Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus. 51 And answering him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And the blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!" 52 And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road.

The beggar named Bartimaeus is a name that means son of Timaeus, because "bar" means "son of." Blind people in this culture had few resources and were without any sort of social support systems so they frequently had to resort to begging. Bartimaeus took great initiative and jumped up on his own, the text doesn't say that someone else led him there. Twice he called to Jesus using the messianic title "Son of David." This indicated that he had some knowledge about who Jesus was. He recognized that Jesus was the only One that could open the eyes of the blind both in the physical sense but also spiritually as well through his use of the messianic title for Him. The blind man then heard the people calling to him and then threw away his cloak, possibly the only valuable possession that he owned. Bartimaeus not only received his sight but the text says that "his faith made him well" (v. 52), meaning that he also received the forgiveness of his sins as well. Afterwards he became a follower of Jesus, both literally and spiritually (v. 52).

What does this mean for us today? We too have to be willing to talk a bold step of faith and throw away our valuable possessions in order to find spiritual healing through Jesus. As former unbelievers, we too are blind to the reality of sin in our lives. Saint Paul says, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 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). There are many reasons that Jesus calls Himself the Light of the World (John 8:12) because as the Light He shines truth upon the spiritual darkness of our hearts. It is only through faith in Jesus that we receive spiritual life (Ephesians 2:8-9). Finally, we can praise God for this tremendous miracle of healing that he provided Bartimaeus in a culture where blind people were on the lowest rung of society. We can praise Him for all of the times that He has healed us and others around us, even if we were not aware of His intervention on our behalf.

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Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the first reading we said that God would make good on both His promises to Israel and His promises to the church. Reflect upon the following promises that God has made to you and how this provides you with hope during the troubled and shorts days of your earthly lifetime.

A. Salvation to all who believe in His Son Jesus. "Romans 1:16-17 NAS95 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.'"

B. God will work out all things for the our good as a believer. "Romans 8:28 NAS95 28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

C. As believers we receive a new life in Christ. "2 Corinthians 5:17 NAS95 17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

D. God promises believers peace when they persist in calling upon Him in prayer. "Philippians 4:6-7 NAS95 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

2. The Book of Hebrews begins with, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (Hebrews 1:1-2). In what ways is Jesus as the truly eternal high priest / king (that fulfilled the requirements of the Law) the only possible One who can make intercession for us (1 Timothy 2:5)?

Readings for the Week

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Keywords:

Melchizedek, Jeremiah, blind man, Bartimaeus

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-18-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **10-18-2015**. This week Marla shares by opening with Isaiah 53: 10-11, which is part of a chapter that depicts in graphic detail Jesus' suffering and death for our sin. Then she turns to a passage in Hebrews 4:14-16 that shows how Jesus has faced the same temptations we face and as a result, is not only sympathetic to us in our struggles but can give us victory over them. Finally she concludes with the Gospel of St. Mark 10: 35-45 where Jesus tells us the key to greatness is being a servant of all.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Isaiah 53 gives one of the clearest depictions in the Old Testament of Jesus as the suffering servant, as it predicts in devastating detail His rejection, humiliation, and death for our sin. Although the prophet Isaiah doesn't reveal the name of this suffering servant, later generations understood that

only Jesus in His death fully corresponded to the one depicted here. This was confirmed by many New Testament writers as they quoted from Isaiah 53 in speaking of Christ. (1 Peter 2: 21-24 is a prime example.)

What Jesus suffered for our sin in order to redeem us is sobering. The 10 verses that precede the First Reading reveal the awful truth. He was despised and forsaken. Furthermore, He was smitten (struck), afflicted, pierced, crushed, chastened, scourged, and oppressed (Isaiah 53:3-7). Yet, "*He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth"* (v.9). His death was truly the just dying for the unjust that He might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

Jesus did not open His mouth in protest because He knew He was fulfilling the Father's will. Referring to His life Jesus said, "*No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative* (Gospel of St. John 10:18).

The next verses, which comprise the First Reading, may seem puzzling at first, for they teach us that the suffering Jesus endured was according to God's *good pleasure.* The word *pleasure* here does not mean happiness but that all would take place according to the LORD's will. As you read the First Reading note the Father's purpose for the Son's suffering.

First Reading:

Isaiah 53:10-11 NAS95 10 But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.

Our iniquity (sin) separates us from God, but the LORD caused the iniquity of us all to fall on His Son (Is. 53:6). Jesus took our guilt and punishment, and by His suffering we are justified, that is, made right before God and restored to a right relationship with Him.

As we consider Christ's suffering and sacrifice on our behalf, let us seek to live out that sacrificial love for the benefit of others. One of the most important ways we can love others is to introduce them to Jesus and tell them of the One who suffered on their behalf.

The Second Reading speaks about another kind of suffering—the struggle against temptation. Jesus faced it and was victorious. When we face temptation, we don't face it alone. We have someone who understands and helps.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The Second Reading takes us to a group of verses set in a larger context that speaks of Jesus as our high priest. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, when someone sinned, he would bring an animal to the priest and the priest would sacrifice it (shed its blood) on the altar in the tabernacle/temple. Behind a heavy curtain was the Holy of Holies (or Holy Place) where God would appear in a pillar of cloud or fire. No one could go in there except the high priest, and he could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would make a sacrifice for himself (for he is a sinner, too) and for the sins of all the people and carry the blood inside the curtain and present it to God. The sacrifice had to be repeated year after year.

Hebrews Ch. 7 and 9 tell us that Jesus is a high priest, but one far superior to the human ones we read about in the Old Testament. And here's why:

Jesus himself was both the high priest *and* the sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice was perfect and total, and God accepted it as final. There was no need for any further sacrifice. No more work needed to be done to procure our salvation. Jesus had done it all. He rested from His work, and now as we hear the Gospel and believe, we enter into that place of rest. We cannot work for our salvation. We can only by faith enter into the salvation and rest Jesus has provided (See Hebrews 4:1-11).

Our First Reading along with all of Isaiah 53 depict the pain of rejection and suffering Jesus endured for our salvation. We don't have a high priest far removed from our pain and struggles but One who has experienced in a body like ours the sufferings of this world. Consequently He can sympathize with each of us in our weakness and suffering. This is true also of the temptations we face each day. He has faced them, too. Notice the comfort and encouragement found in our Second Reading.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 4:14-16 NAS95 14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 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.

Because Jesus has faced the same temptations we face, we can come to Him and find mercy and grace in our time of need. He displays mercy as He sympathizes with our struggles, and He gives grace to overcome them. Because He was victorious, we can be also.

In the following Gospel Reading, the subject again turns to suffering as Jesus takes his 12 disciples aside and reveals disturbing details about his upcoming suffering and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we return to the Gospel of Mark. While on a journey to Jerusalem, Jesus takes his 12 disciples aside and tells them of the suffering He will soon be facing. He will be delivered to the Jewish leaders who will condemn Him to death. Then He will be handed over to the Romans who will mock Him, spit on Him, scourge Him, and kill Him.

Knowing the culmination of Jesus' life was at hand and apparently believing He would soon set up His kingdom, James and John make a bold request. They ask to sit with Him in glory in places of honor at His right hand and His left. Jesus knew the path to glory was through the suffering of the cross, and that all who follow Him would likely suffer, too. Rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom awaited them. Did they know what they were asking for? Could they drink the cup of sorrow He would drink?

Jesus then reminds them that whoever wishes to be great among them doesn't do it by seeking a place of honor or authority. Earthly rulers seek honor, authority, and power and lord it over their subjects. But this is not the way of God. Notice in the Gospel Reading how someone can be great in God's kingdom.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 10:35-45 NAS95 35 James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." 36 And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" 37 They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" 39 They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. 40 But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." 41 Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John. 42 Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. 43 But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

True godly leadership requires serving. In St. John's Gospel, the apostle John recounts how Jesus demonstrated servanthood by humbly washing the disciples' feet—a job reserved for the household

servants. Jesus told His disciples, "*If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you*" (St. John 13:14-15).

Serving sometimes requires not just humility but sacrifice and suffering. Jesus demonstrated His willingness to suffer by dying for our sins on the cross, the ultimate act of service. Are we willing to follow Jesus' example and serve one another, even if it results in suffering? Whoever wishes to be great among us must humbly serve. For even Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many (v. 45).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Read all of Isaiah 53 and contemplate all Jesus suffered on your behalf. How does this motivate you to serve Him more?

2. Jesus lived a life of sacrifice and service. Who is God calling you to serve today? Write down ways you can do that. Be specific and be thankful for the opportunity to follow in Jesus' steps.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/101815.cfm

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-11-2015

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **10-11-2015**. I remember the time when I came home from the office and I saw an ambulance in my neighbor's driveway. Harvey was a man that had retired from the assembly line at General Motors. He was a rough-around-the-edges kind of guy, not someone that you would find going to church each Sunday although his wife did regularly attend. Harvey had struggled with sepsis and had been very close to dying. I had wondered about his spiritual beliefs, and I was sad that I had never shared with him the faith that I had in Jesus Christ. He pulled through this episode, but had horrible ongoing issues including kidney failure and the need for dialysis three times a week. After Harvey returned home, I finally got up the courage to send him a letter explaining the facts of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Even though I could not break through to him face to face, I figured that he would at least read the letter. I explained that his continuing life was evidence of a miracle from God. Later I moved to a far-away state, but I kept in frequent touch with Harvey by cell phone. I never saw any signs of spiritual life in him, but I maintained the relationship, and we developed a closer relationship than we had had when he was living across the street.

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

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

As we move toward verse 12, where today's reading begins, we see the author's summary statement about the heart of the matter, belief in God's written Word. "For indeed we have had good news

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

Second Reading:

Note: Verse 11, which was omitted from the reading, has been included because it provides crucial information about the context and brings out the full meaning.
Hebrews 4:11-13 NAS95 11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

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

The author uses this spiritual metaphor to warn us not to follow their example of gross disobedience, not believing God, the only unforgivable sin in the Bible. Interestingly, verse 12 opens with the preposition "for," which provides a natural linkage with the immediate preceding context. The opening verse, then, could be read this way, "[With] these previous things in mind, the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . ." In the case of the Hebrews in the exodus the Word of God came to them directly through Moses and the priests. In the case of the New Testament context the Word of God comes through God's written Word. It is this written Word that is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword (v. 12a). The author says that the Word is "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (v. 12d). The Word of God convicts

us of our sin through the ***illumination*** provided by God's Holy Spirit. "Illumination," in the spiritual sense, is the turning on of the light bulb in the mind of a person regarding the things of God. There are levels of illumination, and the knowledge of sin is the very first and most basic level. This is what the author of Hebrews is getting at in the reading, where he later criticizes his readers because they are spiritual babies able only to partake of spiritual milk and not solid food (Hebrews 5:12). He cautions his readers in the closing verse to remember that they cannot fool God about all of this because "all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him" (v. 13b).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:
Mark 10:17-30 NAS95 17 As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments, 'DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'" 20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." 21 Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. 23 And Jesus, looking around, said to

His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." 28 Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." 29 Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, 30 but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."

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

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

return on investment in the present age, with eternal life thrown in, to boot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We saw in the opening verse of the passage from Hebrews (which was omitted from the reading) this key sentence: "*11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience*" (Hebrews 4:11). Later we provided this verse from Saint Paul. "*Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come*" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

List and discuss how you have benefited from studying the lives of two specific biblical characters in the Old Testament. In what ways have you learned from their obedience or disobedience?

2. What you understand about the relationship between faith and works in terms of gaining eternal life? Second, how does your position correspond to what James said, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:17).

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/101115.cfm

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