Jim's Testimony: Oh But for the Trees

Forward

I remember a day way back in the 1970s when our family was riding in the car on the way to a weeklong summer vacation in Washington, D.C. On this lovely summer day, my father was driving, and I was riding in the back seat of our Ford Galaxy wagon. We had a long conversation about how various mechanical things worked. Since my father was a high school science teacher, he knew a lot about things that interested me. His explanation was always preceded by just one simple word from me: "Why." I remember that after at least an hour of this discussion, my father started to become agitated as he would explain something, then I would ask "why" again. This led to an endless conversation spiral that my father soon terminated!

I began to understand that without making some rather basic assumptions of truth, nothing in the world was possible to explain. Consider this the next time you try to explain to your child why an apple came from an apple tree or why up is the opposite of down!

During my studies in mechanical engineering at Western Michigan University, I frequently encountered many concepts that initially baffled me. I spent countless hours studying the textbooks and attempting to solve the example problems to understand the concept being taught by my professors. One of the fundamental differences between what I studied in engineering school and what I learned in church was that I initially accepted the engineering concepts as accurate. When I first sat down in the classroom in front of my highly educated professors, only later on did I set out to prove my initial assumption of truth regarding what I was being taught. This was not the case with my beliefs in God. I approached my religion on the basis that even if God existed, He was under the burden to show Himself and prove it to me with no effort on my part!

Later, I set out to study the validity of God and the Bible. During this time, I came across a Bible verse that, in retrospect, I consider paramount for readers of this testimony who are seeking God for themselves. Just like I did in engineering school, I decided to accept the fundamental premise that this particular verse was true. Then, I proceeded to further prove this assumption. After I had done that over several months, I concluded that my assumption of truth was indeed correct.

I ask the reader to read the following Bible verse and accept the basic premise that it is true. The verse is in the Apostle Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians:

"But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them."
II Corinthians 4:3-4

Have you ever been deceived? Has anyone ever pulled a fast one on you?

The basic premise of the passage is that an evil spiritual leader has the ability and has exercised this power to blind the minds of people whose souls will eventually perish because they do not believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This concept of good and evil is a pervasive concept throughout the Bible. The Bible records that the name of the spiritual leader of the evil forces is Satan, also known in this verse above as "the god of this age."

This takes me back to my spiritual journey that began in the spring of 1998. Even though I thought that I was a Christian, I rarely read the Bible. Even when I did, I was incapable of understanding it. My church told me what to believe in terms of religion. Because of this, my relationship with God was very impersonal. I viewed the people who showed personal love for Jesus as hypocrites and religious zealots! This is how the spiritual leaders in Jesus' time viewed Him!

I pray that through the reading of this testimony you will develop the spiritual vision to allow you to see the forest but for the trees.

Jim

Part One

In the Forest

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

I found myself single in my middle thirties, just another member of the human rat race. I had a good job as an engineer at Ford, excellent health and a very good life. I need to mention one more thing – I wanted revenge for some folks that had harmed me in the past.

In those days my heart and soul were not in a lot of things that

I did. I did not look at life as a blessing, rather I did things

pretty much just for me.

I was very selfish. This had led to the breakup with my girl-

friend Jeanie many years before. After that,

I focused on worldly things.

I began windsurfing, and traveled around the world to have fun.

I went to Hood River Oregon and all over the US to windsurf.

I went to Hawaii and to the Dominican Republic.

I went to Barbados, Martinique and Cancun.

- bought a boat and learned to water ski.

- learned to snow ski, and snowboard.

- visited most of the major ski resorts in the US.

- started lifting weights.

- learned to fly and bought my own airplane.

- went to church on Sundays, because I felt an obligation. When

- left the service, many times

- felt very good inside, like

- had done something for God, that I had earned His favor. But,

- drank lots of beer and developed an affinity for dirty movies.

- strived for success at Ford, and enrolled at the University of

Detroit – Mercy to earn my MBA. My heart was in the world.

- I was religious.

- I was not a bad person.

- I never hurt anyone.

- I went to church every Sunday. One more little thing:

- I didn't realize that I was lost living a worldly life and on the road to Hell.

There seemed to be a common theme in my life – **"I"** am certain of that! Let's go back a few years to see how I got into this position.

In the Beginning

I was born into a family that provided me with a very blessed life! My parents were hard working schoolteachers in western Michigan who also owned a family farm. They loved and provided very well for me and my five brothers and sisters. They even paid my way through college. My parents looked after my every need. I enjoyed learning how to work on the farm, and loved the county life.

I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church. Both of my parents were also raised there. At an early age I attended church religiously. Right from the start I did not like the Catechism classes. When I was unable to avoid attending the class, the Catechism teachers tried to drum their doctrine into my mind. But for some reason my mind simply did not allow them to do this and their words fell on deaf ears! This made my Catechism teachers angry. They taught a method of reaching up to God through a complex system of good works, church attendance, and sacraments. Their methods were very authoritarian, and it was clear that they did not enjoy what they were doing. It was as if they were robotically following a rigid script.

Grade School Years

During my grade school years in the local public school, I was a pretty normal child. I enjoyed playing outdoor sports and began writing stories about a couple of characters I called the City Mouse and the Country Mouse. I liked letting my mind wander and pretended that I was one of these characters! I got a lot of time for that to happen in church each week and at Catechism. The other kids in my class used to love to hear me read these stories.

Something came along that made my story writing stop, never to resume. The City Mouse and Country Mouse were lost forever! What, or rather, who could cause such a sudden change in my life? I was not a bad person. I never hurt anyone. I went to church every Sunday.

Beginning in the fourth grade things began to change at my school rather suddenly. Although I did not think that I was a bad boy, it seemed that my teachers did. This was especially true of my fourth grade homeroom teacher Mr. Williams. This teacher began to use all kinds of creative techniques to break my spirit. Although I do not think that this was his intent, this was the effect that it had on me. I began to think that I was a very bad child! This was back in the days of corporal punishment and small indiscretions were met with terrible public punishments. Often I was forced to stand on my tiptoes and hold me hands on a line across the chalkboard, which was barely within reach. After several minutes, I would begin to get tired and my hands would begin to drop below the line. Under the supervision of my teacher, this would be met with further punishments, like public spankings or being forced to write sentences with degrading phrases like "I am a monkey." He would assign this simply by writing the word "monkey" on the board with a name next to it and a number indicating how many times this would have to be written. Then we would write these sentences in chalk on the board. These punishments were dished out on kids that exhibited outgoing behavior and were done in front of everyone as an example to the other children. The quiet kids that just went along with things, and all of the girls, avoided these punishments.

The torment and humiliation by Mr. Williams went on for a full year, and other teachers like Mr. Sanders continued for another two years. During this three year period I was taught that I was a terrible child. During this time I learned to hate myself. And it seemed that when I went to church things were not much better since they taught me that I was a good person only if I was perfectly nice and did good deeds to make me righteous.

I am certain that these teachers felt that they were helping me. I am also certain that they were probably treated the same way as children. But how could I ever forgive what these terrible people had done to me? Who would even believe me, since by then I really knew that I really was a terrible person?

I remember that there was a man there that was the assistant elementary school principle. This man seemed responsible for much of the chaos. One of his first actions was to paint a yellow line down the hallway. Any kid caught crossing that yellow line would meet tremendous punishment. Another step that he took was to impose speed limits on walking. If you walked too fast you were met with immediate punishment. There were endless rules for everything. When I returned to my homeroom, I was met with additional torture from Mr. Williams! What was worse was it seemed that the teachers would caucus about us because we were such "bad kids." And to top it off, when word got back to my parents that I was a "bad kid" in school I was met with additional punishment at home.

I never really tried to tell my parents about what was occurring, since I thought that they would not believe me. When I finally did attempt to tell them, they listened in unbelief. This resulted in a lack of respect for my parents and others in positions of authority. Then I would go back to Catechism and hear people in positions of authority speaking lies. When I went to church on Sunday and get further confused by the ceremony whereby I was supposed to better myself with God by sitting in a church pew. I knew that I was a loser so sitting in church did not make things any better for me. I was caught in an endless cycle of pain from which there seemed no way of escape!

There was one factor that made my experiences more difficult during my middle school years. This was that my brother and I watched each other going through the same troubles. When one of us was suffering, due to the protective nature of being a sibling, both of us would suffer! So we both had things doubly bad! Both of us hated Catechism, but my brother was stronger at going along with the program, so he got in less trouble during it than I did. It is difficult for me to relate the extent to which my brother and I were harmed by the treatment that we received in school and Catechism.

During the sixth grade I began to see a light at the end of the tunnel since Junior High was approaching. My life became very difficult during these years but began to return to "normal" towards Junior High. Whereas my elementary school should have prepared me to meet the challenges of Junior High, I entered this phase of my life traumatized.

I was not a bad person. I never hurt anyone. I went to church every Sunday.

Junior High

In Junior High, my experiences at church further validated my beliefs that I was a loser. This was because everything that I was taught there revolved around things that I HAD to do. Somehow I managed to do all of the sacraments and the other things that the church said would bring me to Heaven later on when I died. I did the religious "works" for the sake of pleasing my Catechism teachers and my parents. I tried as hard as I could to meet their religious standards to become a good person, but no matter how hard I tried I always came up short!

I found myself absolutely dreading the weekly Catechism classes. The material was boring, the teachers were mean, and I felt absolutely no love from these people! Many times the teachers removed me from the class because I did not go along with their program. By that time I knew that I was a terrible person! This reminded me of the treatment that I had received back in grade school from Mr. Williams and the others. I filed away in my mind a long list of grievances against these terrible teachers and principals! Someday I knew that I would get even with them!

I found out later that my Catechism teachers were teaching religion rather than Christianity which is not a religion but is instead a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

High School

My experiences in high school were much better than what had happened during my earlier years. I still knew that I was a terrible person and not worthy of anyone's affection, but I had begun to realize that I could make up for this by clowning around. I started having fun by behaving very crazy, to get the attention that I greatly longed for. Attention that I needed to validate myself, to make me feel I was really an OK person. I longed for someone to sit me down and help me to heal from all of the things that had happened to me over the years in that useless middle school!

Along came my band teacher Mr. Wheeler. I began to experience great joy in aggravating this particular teacher! I pulled all kind of jokes on him. I remember one prank especially well. I knew that when our concert band class was over, Mr. Wheeler would lock the room and go to lunch. So I proceeded to make a slight modification to the door jam on the rear door of the room. I simply turned the lock plate backwards and upside down. Because the hole for the striker was offset, the door latch had nothing to engage into. So if the door were closed it would not latch. My friend and I waited until class was over, and then watched from down the hall as Mr. Wheeler attempted to slam the door. When he slammed it, it bounced right back open! It was hilarious! Mr. Wheeler didn't think so. There was never too much proof of who actually did these things. But both of us knew.

After a few years of this, Mr. Wheeler quit teaching. I know that I was at least partially to blame for this.

College and Beyond

During engineering school at Western Michigan University, I met Jeanie who was studying at Southwestern Michigan College to become a nurse. I accepted a job with Ford in Dearborn, Michigan as a product design engineer. My girlfriend Jeanie stayed behind to finish up school. We attended Mass together on Sunday since I traveled home to visit her every weekend. Having been raised on a farm in the country I was not into the big-city life. So I worked Monday through Friday and escaped on weekends back to my parent's farm and my girlfriend. My heart was just not in the hectic life that I was living!

No Report Card on My Life!

My life went along well, but I had a void in my heart. This is rather hard for me to describe. Nothing major happened in my life that caused me to reflect on how I was living. I never had one of those life-changing moments you hear about from others that went through hard times, like having someone close to them die or having a heart attack themselves. I remember back when I was in school that I would receive a grade report every semester. Later on at Ford I received a performance review every year. But in my personal life, I never received any kind of report card at

all. It would have been possible for me to live my entire life in an extremely unsatisfactory manner, die, and not even know the score.

I always hoped that somehow God would just sit me down partway through my life, and then I could be given a chance to fix things before I went too far down the turnpike of life. I knew that I had not lived my life for God, and that I had made many bad decisions. There was a void in my heart. I deeply wanted a loving, all-powerful God to let me appear before Him like on the popular 1970's television show "This is Your Life" and tell me something like as follows.

> "This is your life Jim. I have called you here to give you a chance to set your life back on track – to tell you where you have done good and bad in your life. You have exactly 37 years, 7 months, and 4 days left to live. I love you Jim and want the very best for you. This is the story of your life."
> Imagine then, that this loving and perfectly just Spirit told me what I was doing that was right and wrong, and gave me a plan to fix things to His satisfaction. Then I would have the remaining portion of my life to live according to what He wanted me to do! Oh how I longed for that! Nothing like this ever happened. I watched several people near to me suffer divorces and mid-life crises, including a male friend of mine that left his wife and moved in with a man. I began to feel like I was wasting my life away. Years and years went by…….

I was a good person.

I went to church on Sunday.

I never killed anyone.

I did not steal.

I helped my parents on the farm.

I worked hard at my job.

I lived my life and didn't harm anybody.

Revenge

Back in my middle thirties where this story began, I was looking to blame some people from my past for the problems that I was experiencing. Specifically, I blamed my elementary teacher Mr. Williams. I starting having thoughts and even went so far as to mentally plan taking revenge for what Mr. Williams had put me through back in fourth grade. I began to think about how I could even the score with him, to get even for what he had put me through. Even though these violent thoughts never went beyond the fantasy stage, it was apparent that I had deep-seated anger against this man. I was not a bad person. I never hurt anyone. I went to church every Sunday.

And yet now Mr. Williams and all of the other teachers and principals are forgiven, forever. How can that be? I wish them nothing but the very best. What happened to make me change my mind?

This was my state of mind when my brother starting making some changes in his life.

Brother Where Art Thou?

Before I tell the story about my brother, I need to state that he was the one that was instrumental in helping me to set my life back on track. It was through the struggles in his life that helped to guide me towards the truth. I am deeply indebted to him!

My brother was always an extremely hard worker – a workaholic really. He never really had any

hobbies – his work was his life. Due to this, he began to seek methods of taking relieving some stress in his life. He was a very religious man back in 1994. He went to church every Sunday and often attended weekday church services at the local Catholic Church. At this time, I was living with him in Ann Arbor, Michigan when some of his new friends started coming around his house. My brother was living a rather extravagant life and bought a fancy new Mercedes convertible. In the fall of that year he told me that he wanted his freedom so I moved out of his house. I found a place in Royal Oak, Michigan and moved away. This led to a string of events which resulted in him selling his home and moving to California. A few months after that, he moved to south Florida.

One evening in early 1997, my brother was traveling from Florida to Michigan for a visit. He was driving his new Mercedes in downtown Atlanta on northbound I-75 when a very strange thing happened. His steering wheel suddenly slipped from his hands and his car changed over one lane to the left. He told me that he was very surprised by what happened, but immediately after this there was a stopped car with no lights on in the lane that he had just vacated. The cars behind him slammed into the car, and he dialed 911 and continued on his way. He was saved from certain death or serious injury due to this miracle!

Have you ever had any strange events like this happen to you? In my case, this event made me reflect on my life. Maybe there were other forces at work?

My brother returned to Michigan that summer and spent time back home on my parent's farm; lounging, recovering and far away from the pressures of his work. Later he returned to work and moved into my condo in Royal Oak. Gradually he began to stop his party lifestyle and turned his life around.

What caused my brother to begin to make these changes in his life? We found out together that we had been deceived. But how were we deceived? We were not bad people. We never hurt anyone. We went to church every Sunday.

I Was the Master of My Life, Right?

I just knew that I was "better" than my brother. I did not use drugs, ever, not even once. I was in control of my life. Even though I didn't have a grand vision of what I should accomplish in my life, I still felt like I was in control. Why couldn't other folks get things figured out? Still, there was this nagging in my heart. Maybe I was not in such good control of my life as I thought.

I always thought then when a person died, God would judge them based upon their good works outweighing their bad works. I found out later, that this was incorrect. My brother was deceived in that he thought he was doing OK by dabbling in the fast lane and living a worldly life so long as he went to church on Sunday. He also thought that he would be granted entrance into Heaven because of faithfulness in going to church. I believed the same thing – that even with all the bad things in our lives, our good works evened out the score with God.

Brother to the Rescue

In early 1999 my brother approached me with some interesting material that he found on the web. He emailed me the link to the web site, and I quickly read the material. The web page was: http://www.cuttingedge.org/salvation.html. I carefully studied the information that they presented on their web page entitled "Salvation" and was very intrigued by it. My opinion of the rest of the site was that it was a bit far "right." But at that time, I was pretty far right also! In fact, I attended meetings of a gun-toting people's rights group called Justice Pro Se of Michigan. So, I read and studied the site very carefully! This far out stuff was right up my alley.

I was very puzzled by the information on the website, and began searching for everything that I could read about salvation. Shortly thereafter, my brother came to me and said that he had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior and had been "born again." I was confused. I thought that only "good" people were guaranteed entrance into Heaven, that it was something that we earned. I wondered how my brother, a man who still occasionally dabbled in the party scene, could be "born again." I started searching for the truth. I found more information about Jesus on the Internet. I bought a dusty old Bible at a used bookstore on Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak. Here is some of what I found in my search.

"For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23

I always knew that I was a sinner, but I thought that due to my good works and church attendance, God would just kind of overlook my sin. I thought that what was really important was how I treated people – the Golden Rule.

I wondered how I was standing in terms of my self-imposed standards of righteousness. What was troubling me was that my church attendance had started to become more infrequent. And I knew that I was very selfish and did not treat people as well as I should. Truly, I did not do very many good works for anyone. On this basis I knew that I according to my own standards I was doomed! I began to wonder where I stood according to God's standard.

Then I came across another passage:

"For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 6:23

It started to become very clear to me that without some other method of getting rid of my sin, when I died I was going to be left with it. I asked myself, if God is Holy, which means separate, or apart from sin, how can I enter into His presence in Heaven when I die? For how could a perfectly just God overlook my sin? If He let just a little bit of sin into Heaven, would that be perfect justice?

I came across a story later on that helped me to understand the concept of justice. Let's say a person committed a terrible crime, and went before a judge saying that they were sorry, and would never do it again. Would justice be done if the judge simply let them go free? No! Sin demands punishment, and I knew that I was guilty!

I continued seeking and came across more verses in my old black King James Bible.

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." John 14:6

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"Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3:3

"Assuredly, I say unto you, unless you are **converted** and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of Heaven." Matthew 18:3

There was that term again – Born Again! Converted? Was I born again? Converted? I purchased and read the book The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel. After that, once again I opened my Holy Bible and read both the Gospels of Mark and John. I started to understand that I had been deceived by Satan – the god of this age, the master of deception. I was deceived into believing that in order to go to Heaven, I had to earn my way there. Earn it by going to church, doing good deeds, by becoming righteous. I knew FULL WELL that I was not "born again." In fact, the Bible told me so!

"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified. But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified." II Corinthians 13:5-6

Was I "born again," or "converted"? My parents cautioned me about not judging people. On the other hand, the Bible said that we needed to judge ourselves – our eternal destiny was at stake here. Was I "born again"? No, I was not. Was I really blinded to the truth in the Bible? I suspected that I was, since ever since I was a child in church, none of it ever made any sense to me. In fact, reading it made me angry! I came across the following verse in the Bible that made this clear to me.

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has **blinded** the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." II Corinthians 4:3-6

Slowly I began to understand, and my eyes began to open. I started to understand the excitement that I saw in my brother. Shortly thereafter, my sister Kathie called and said that she had

undergone a change in her life. She told me that she had prayed to accept Jesus as her personal Savior and Lord. I wanted what my brother and sister had! I was not sure how to get it though. I kept studying and reading and asking questions. I wanted this faith that they were talking about.

I found a verse that said "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17). I found more information in my Bible:

"…that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." Romans 10:9-13

Doubts and Orthodox Jews

After reading and studying all of that Biblical material over and over again, you would think that I would begin to become enlightened. Instead, the opposite happened and I began to have doubts that God even existed! I began to wonder if it was like one of my employees told me, that God was just a fairy tale.

Looking back to the spring of 1998, I had long since left Ford. I had just left my job as an engineer at an automotive plastics supplier and joined my brother's software consulting company. This company was so small that one of my first tasks was to locate some office space for him. I was fortunate to find a small office in Southfield, Michigan, which is home to many Jewish people. During my drives to and from this office I would see Jewish people walking with their funny hats and long coats. These were of the orthodox variety, which wore plain black and white clothes and had long beards.

Then it finally hit me. These were the same Jews that my Bible was written about! This was validation that there was something real to all of this. Here thousands of years later I doubted that

they existed, and yet there they were walking directly beside me on Ten Mile Road in Southfield, Michigan!

Was God Calling to Me?

I began to believe that God might be real. It was at this point that I decided that if God was real, He was going to have to reveal Himself to me. I said a heart-felt prayer, saying "God, how have You revealed yourself to me in the past? I need this answer Lord to believe that You are real." Very shortly thereafter, memories of strange things that had happened to me over the years returned.

"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." Hebrews 11:6

In the spring of 1999, I traveled to Beaver Island with my now Bible toting brother. It was there that I found time to reflect on everything that was going on in my life. During and after this island getaway, God revealed to me four specific cases where he had shown himself to me. One of those is too private to share. Let me tell you that this first very private revelation all by itself was enough to convince me that God existed! Someday I may share that, but for now I would have to shoot you if I told you! We wouldn't want that, so here are the other stories in which God directly showed me that He was real in my life.

In the first story I had lost a very valuable part on my car. This was during a very stressful time in my life in which I was attending college at WMU in 1983. This tiny part was a spring from inside the car stereo, my link to enjoyment and an escape from the cruel reality of engineering school. The car was a 1977 Ford Granada that we had just bought from my aunt. While attempting to repair this stereo inside the car, an extremely small spring went flying across the cluttered farm building that I was working in. I was heartbroken, since this was my only time that I had time to fix the stereo, and this part was so small and unique that there was zero chance of getting the nice Clarion brand stereo working again. So, I put my hands together and prayed "God, I am having a hard time in my life. I am struggling in school. Please show me where to locate this spring." I was near tears during this prayer. Immediately, I was compelled to leave the car and go to a certain spot in the BACK seat. Now, this was the very LAST place that I would have looked, since I knew the spring had flown

across the vast wasteland of my dad's farm building. My eyes were led to the exact spot where that spring was lying. I thanked God for the miracle. I proceeded to install the spring on the next try. The stereo worked great, at least until three years later when my little brother crashed into another car that was stopped inspecting a lost horse along the street!

In the second story I almost did something very, very dumb. It was sometime around mid-1996. I was going to work on my airplane; a Cessna 172 that I had just purchased. Remember, I said that I have lived a very blessed life! It had a fuel drain fitting on the left fuel tank that was stuck inside the threaded hole. I thought that I would just take my electric heat gun and apply a small amount of heat to loosen the fitting. I was in my garage in Royal Oak, getting ready to head out there to the airport where the plane was. I wanted to make sure the gun was working, so I plugged it in and heard the familiar fan sound, and a very hot stream of air coming out. In the past I had used this very heat gun and accidentally started fires due to the extreme heat it produced. In fact, the outside of the heat gun had already been melted. It was working just fine. All of a sudden, the heat gun flew out of my hands, across the room, and onto the concrete floor of the garage. I just knew that when I plugged it back in that it would be dead. I did, and it was. I read the label on the side of the gun. It said, "Red Devil." You see, I have always believed in God. I just doubted Him at times. And I knew that this was a miracle. So, I prayed and thanked Him right then. I don't think that I went out to the airport that night!

In the third story I was preparing to fly my Cessna 172 from New Hudson, Michigan to St. Louis, Missouri to visit a Ford Motor Company assembly plant. This was sometime around the summer of 1997 while I was working as a product engineer at an automotive plastics company. Back in those days before the Word Trade Center attack, I was allowed to fly my airplane during the course of my business as an engineer. I recently had obtained my instrument rating and was still learning about flying in bad weather. I packed my clothes and checked the weather before leaving my home in Royal Oak and driving out to the airport. It was the classic dark and stormy night with light rain falling, and the weather was worse in St. Louis with large areas of thunderstorms. I had a very uneasy feeling about this trip, but I really needed to go to St. Louis to check on the launch of the new power steering reservoir that I had designed for the new Ford F250/F350 truck. A thought ran through my head as I was packing the plane and getting ready to taxi to the fuel pump that I should pray. I remember that I prayed asking for a sign on whether I should go. As I taxied the plane to the fuel pump, all the instrument panel lights suddenly burned out and the panel was completely dark except for the lighting inside a couple of the radios. Once again, I recognized the sign from God and thanked Him right then! I am certain that had I undertaken this flight that I would have flown into thunderstorms and become another aviation statistic.

The common theme that runs throughout these stories is divine protection from God. I found a verse in the Bible that explained this. In this verse, the author of the book of Hebrews was discussing angels.

"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" Hebrews 1:14

This simple verse had momentous implications to me. If God had indeed utilized guardian angels to protect me, this verse stated that I would inherit salvation. And I was learning that the "salvation" came through faith in Jesus, and this meant an eternity in Heaven with God.

The verse on angels made me reflect on other people whom I knew had experiences with divine intervention in their lives. I knew of two people that had such an experience. The first was my brother while he was driving in Atlanta, and he was a born-again Christian. The second was my former girlfriend Jeanie. Looking back to 1986 her story is as follows.

Seeking Good Works

During this time in my life, I began to seek opportunities for helping other people. Since I owned an airplane at the time I volunteered for an organization called AirLifeline Midwest. This organization provided a service to link qualified pilots with their own aircraft with medical patients requiring transportation to medical facilities. The patients need for transportation was predicated on the basis of financial need. I found out that when people develop a long-term illness, many deplete their financial resources while dealing with the disease. Additionally, many desperately ill patients desired advanced medical techniques available in locations far away from their homes.

Over the course of the next several years, I was fortunate to be able to provide many flights to patients and their family members all over the Midwest and Great Lakes. I began to feel a sense of fulfillment in serving others. This was occurring at the same time that I was learning about God's plan of salvation for mankind.

But some things were troubling me about owning an airplane. I found that many people identified me with the airplane, or with my windsurfing, or other things that I did. In a way I appreciated being the worldly superstar, the pilot of a fast airplane, traveling the country to windsurf. But on the other hand, I began to realize that I did not want to be remembered for these worldly things.

Would my good works get me into Heaven? I was not a bad person. I never hurt anyone. I went to church just about every Sunday. One more little thing: I was lost.

What Didn't the Church Tell Me?

I was taught, and always believed that my good works would get me to Heaven. I thought that when I died, God would see if my good works kind of outweighed my bad works, and then he would let me into Heaven. This was what both my church and my parents taught me. When I finally looked in the Bible, the one that many people died to preserve, I found out that my good works by themselves would not get me into Heaven. In thinking that my good works accounted me worthy before God, what I was forgetting was Jesus. Why did Jesus have to come and die if I could earn my way to Heaven? My parents were confused about this too. In the Bible, Isaiah said that "my righteous deeds were as filthy rags before the Lord." (Isaiah 64:6) I also found out that the primary teaching of Islam was judgment on the basis of works.[1]

I looked at more verses in the Bible.

"For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: [it is] the **gift** of God." Ephesians 2:8-9

"Not by **works** of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Titus 3:5

I asked myself this question: If someone offered me a gift, then I went to them before I accepted it

and told them six reasons why I had earned the gift, would this really be a gift? I asked myself, would the person giving the gift be insulted by the inference that I had earned it? Is Salvation a gift? Could I earn it? If so, how was I doing? Was I good enough yet? The authoritative source, the Bible, said that I could not earn it, and did not deserve it.

I kept on studying.

"Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Revelation 3:20 (Jesus speaking)

I began to realize that up until the present time I was on the "Jesus Plus Plan." I had a temporal belief in Jesus, a purely intellectual knowledge in contrast to having a heart knowledge of Him. To this lukewarm belief I added good works, going to church, and being a good person. In effect, I was adding to what God had said that I must do to be saved from Hell! Revelation 22:18 was pretty clear that doom awaited anyone that added to the Word of God:

"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book;" Revelation 22:18

This really made me start to think. The Bible told me that I could not be saved from Hell by doing good works or upholding traditions. If being a good person would not get me to Heaven, was I doomed to Hell even though I still went to Church?

Born Again

It was in the fall of 1999 that I finally realized that Jesus had died for my sins, as a substitute, and that He was the only way to Heaven. Salvation was a gift from God granted once I believed in Jesus.

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under Heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

"Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." John 14:6

I remembered what I had read in the Old Testament Bible about the Jews sacrificing lambs during the Passover. It finally hit me that Jesus was the final sacrificial Lamb, the Lamb of God, whose blood was poured out upon the cross at Calvary. Jesus said that I had to open the door – He would knock, but I had to accept and believe upon Him as my personal Lord and Savior.

Up until then, I had "**I**" trouble. I did this to get to Heaven. I did that to become righteous; or my own god. Everything was about me. In fact, I had rejected the Lord Jesus. So I took a step of faith and accepted Jesus as my Savior and Lord of my life.

"Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3

I finally figured out that it just came down to FAITH in Jesus – the Jesus of the Bible! It began to be very clear to me that I needed to trust in what Jesus did on the cross for me NOW, before I died. I believed that Jesus died for my sins, was raised by God, and was in Heaven. I believed everything in the Apostles Creed that I prayed out loud every Sunday. But I just knew that I had never actually trusted in the Lord Jesus ALONE to save me.

What Being Born Again Meant to Me

After I made the commitment to accept Jesus as my Savior and Lord, I began to slowly yield my will to Him. I began praying to God every day and throughout the day. I came to realize that God would accept even a sinner like me through the sacrifice that Jesus made for me. I began to place my faith

in what God was doing in my life and others around me, rather than what I was doing. Even though I had always respected the Bible, I began to read it daily, especially the gospels of John and Mark. I stopped praying repetitive prayers, as was clearly opposed by Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 6:7. God began to show me through His word to yield my will to others rather than my selfish, worldly interests. I began looking for others that believed in the saving power of Jesus as I did.

After this I began a thorough search for a church that believed as I did; in the truth of God's word found in the Bible. I attended various churches over a period of six months or so and finally selected a non-denominational Christian Church. I liked this church because even though I was a Catholic, I was accepted right away. People were nice to me, and I found many other Roman Catholics were there!

My Performance Review from God

After this, I realized that the fact that I accepted Jesus as my Savior yielded a kind of ongoing "performance review" with God, through the Holy Spirit. This is very hard for me to put into words. Almost at once I lost the very sad feeling that I had, that my life was a waste, that it had been in vain. Once I began yielding to the will of God, I realized that Jesus died for my sins ONCE, and that the Bible said He was coming back to the earth again in the very same way in which He left. I realized that I had been deceived by the trappings of RELIGION.

In my mind not even my little brother had told me the truth about God and Jesus, although he had known it since he was 16 years old. In fact, after he had read this testimony letter, he told me that he had indeed told me about Jesus Christ. Yet somehow I did not listen.

The Bible says in Galatians 4:16 "**Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?**" He did tell me – even though he knew that I would get mad. I would rather that someone be angry with me in the short term, than to have them hear the following verse which Jesus said as a warning to RELIGIOUS people, like I used to be.

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in Heaven. Many will say to me in that day 'Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" Matthew 7: 21-23

Was I Really Better Than my Brother?

Was I really better than my brother? No! The reason that I thought that I was better than my brother was what God calls pride. God hates pride (Mark 7:22), and I had major dose of it! I developed this pride by going to church, by doing good works for the flying charity, and by trying to earn my way to Heaven. My pride was one of many sins that I asked the Lord to forgive me of after I came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Before my decision for Jesus, I thought that I had total control of my life, when in fact; I was on the road to Hell! Two years after I accepted Jesus, I recognized that I was relying more upon Jesus as my Savior than as my Lord. I knew from the Bible that the two were inseparable, and that I could not claim the promises of Jesus without yielding my will to him. I realized that my human nature to sin was still very much with me, but that I had Jesus as my ally in fighting the temptation. Without Him I was unable to resist these temptations – I was locked in a constant struggle with sin! It was at this point that I confessed some secret sin in my life to one of the elders of my church. I found victory in accepting Jesus as my Savior, but I had to yield to his authority as Lord.

With Jesus' victory on the cross for all sin, all of us can be victorious! And what's better, we don't have to earn it. We only have to believe that God forgave all of our sins through the death of his Son Jesus. Once this acceptance is made, we are "born again," even if we don't have a spectacular feeling when this happens. In fact, in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus said that we won't have a feeling when it happens, since it is not something that WE are doing, rather the act of the spiritual birth is done by God. Many people come to faith in Jesus and then pray a simple prayer like is attached to the end of this testimony.

Forgiveness

At this point in my life I was able to forgive all of the people that had harmed me over the years. I forgave Mr. Williams along with the other teachers in my middle school. The act of forgiving these people provided a great sense of freedom for me, and a happy retirement for Mr. Williams!
Post Script: As of 2024 he is suffering with dementia. May the Lord have mercy on him and reach him through my Savior Jesus.

What about Mr. Wheeler? Would he ever forgive me for what I put him through? Whatever became of him? I found out that when he left his teaching job at my high school, he had married a lady named Linda from my hometown. Later, he enrolled and completed Bible School, then became an associate pastor at a Bible believing church in Indiana. He has a large family and is doing very well.

I was fortunate to be able to located Mr. Wheeler in the summer of 2000. I am very sorry about the way that I treated him, and he has forgiven me. You may find this hard to believe, but Mr. Wheeler and I are now friends. I have been blessed with several opportunities to visit him since I came to faith in Jesus. Through Mr. Wheeler I have been very fortunate to meet many of his wife's relatives from my hometown.

If I can locate the other teachers, I am going to send them a copy of this testimony!

How Could I Have Been So Deceived?

How could I have been so deceived as to think that I could earn my way to Heaven? Let's look at some passages which show the facts on this.

"For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: [it is] the **gift** of God." Ephesians 2:8-9

By definition we are saved by grace through faith. The Bible says that if we call upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:13) then God gives us spiritual discernment, leading to a certainly of Heaven. By definition we are saved by grace through faith**!** That is the only way that we can know that we are! And the act of saving us cannot be earned since Jesus did it on the cross for us. This is explained in the following passages.

"And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." Romans 11:6

"I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" Galatians 2:21

"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." Galatians 2:16

"For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt." Romans 4:3-4

Can a Christian presume, or be certain that they are going to Heaven? This is clearly explained in the following verses.

"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God." 1John 5:13

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me **has** everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. "John 5:24

I know according to God's word that the only true church is the group of believers known as Christians, the body of Christ. I know that when I die, I will be reunited with Christians from all around the world and from all of the different churches in my hometown, whether Catholic or Protestant. But I also know that I had to answer the knock from Jesus. Mere church attendance did not make me become a Christian. This came through a personal acceptance of Jesus as my Lord and Savior.

Is God Calling You?

Have you recognized and accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior? What this comes down to is your relationship with the person known as Jesus Christ. Why did Jesus have to come and die? The following verse explains what Jesus expects us to do when He calls us.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." Revelation 3:20

When Jesus calls us, He expects us to listen to Him by reading His word in the Bible. Second, He expects us open our hearts and receive Him, which means a surrender of the reliance upon our good deeds or religious works for salvation.

William Faye, a popular evangelist had this to say about the other ways in which people think they are earning their way to Heaven.

"Kind of think of it this way. In my left hand is every religion other than Christianity. And they all make two consistent claims. The first claim they make is that Jesus is not God. The second claim they make is that some effort on your part; could be diet, terrorist acts, good deeds, can get you from earth to Heaven. Now, Christianity, which we will call my other hand, says two opposite things. It says that Jesus is God and that God had to come to us – we can 't get to Him. Know one logical fact; two opposites, both can't be true. Now they both could be wrong, but they both can't be true. I'll admit that if my left hand is true, it doesn't matter which of those religions you are, because they are all saying the same thing. And I'll admit that my faith would be in vain. But I am

wondering if all of them would be as honest to admit that if Christianity is true, that their faith is in vain."[2]

The Bible in the book of James says "faith without works is dead." James 2:17

James (me!!), Chapter 1, verse 1 says "Works without faith is death."

"There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death." Proverbs 14:12

You see, our works will never remove the sin from our life. Our works will never erase this debt with God; it was something that only God could do. The Bible was clear that God was the one that was calling me to faith in Him. It was not something that I could earn; it was something that I had to accept. Once I accepted it; I had to let God be the Lord of my life.

"Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3:3

In looking at the physical and spiritual births, I could either be born once, and die twice, or born twice, and die once.[3]

"… so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many." Hebrews 9:28

The Jews, and other "religions," still practice in ways that they believe will make them righteous before God. As a Christian, I know that the only way that I will be declared righteous is through what Jesus Christ did for me by dying on the cross. This free gift of salvation was offered to me, but until I actually accepted it by responding to God's calling placed upon my heart, I was LOST! The fact that I was "born again" did not come automatically through my church attendance. I had to recognize the calling that God has placed upon my heart and accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior.

"By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Hebrews 10:10-14

Are you being called by God? If you died today, would you go to Heaven? If your answer is yes, then I beg you to honestly ask yourself why would God let you in? If you say something like "because I am a good person, I go to church every Sunday, I have done good things for my family, I have never hurt anyone, etc.," according to God, you would not be allowed into Heaven on the basis of your good works alone. This is what God tells us in His Word, the Bible. Would you like to be absolutely certain of going to Heaven? Are you willing to take that step of faith and accept the free gift?

What if you don't go to church – are you lost forever? NO! David Berkowitz was saved in prison. He used to be a Satan worshiper and mass murderer.[4] One of the criminals on the cross next to Jesus was saved, and he didn't attend even one single church service to earn his way there – he was too busy dying. It is not too late for you. This is a free gift which you cannot earn. All that you have to do is answer the call from God and believe that the blood of Jesus washed away your sins forever.

Frankly, most people just never hear the message of salvation. They never listen, and they never seek. They never get that mid-life "performance review" from God. They just go to their graves simply hoping that everything will be OK with their souls. Or that their religion will save them. Or they die suddenly and just never get around to it. Many plan on "repenting on their death beds" so to speak.

Do not rely on wishing. Don't rely on what just your priest or Catechism teachers have told you. Test everything you are told against the definitive source, which is your Bible and not your feelings. Feelings lie, but God does not. You may feel that you accepted Jesus as your Savior, but do you remember this happening, or have you just always gone to church and thought you were saved? God determined the plan of salvation, not any church or religious institution. Do not assume anything, your eternal soul is far too valuable to entrust it to someone else. Rely upon God to save you.

How important is your eternal soul to you? Our lives are but a vapor and all of us will be gone soon. If you believe that Jesus died for your sins, and recognize that you need to accept Jesus as your

Savior, turn to the end of this testimony to the INVITATION section.

The Teacher that Cared

Since both of my parents were teachers, many times I have heard stories about a certain teacher that positively impacted a person's life. My father had many people approach him over the years telling him that he was this teacher. My father was a very special teacher and I was fortunate to have him teach me many science subjects in my very own high school!

Earlier in my life, another teacher really put her arms around me and gave me a head start. This was my first-grade teacher Mrs. Locke. Mrs. Locke had a reputation for being very stern. This was verified my older brother who had her for his teacher several years before me. But right away she had a way of accepting me, even though I was kind of a hyperactive child. I had a speech problem which made saying words with the letter "R" difficult for me. Oh "Weally" you say! Mrs. Locke showed me great love and allowed me great latitude in my learning. She showed me special attention in teaching difficult concepts. And she allowed me to sit on the heating radiator when I had my work done!

Mrs. Locke had no way of knowing that since she showed me such special love, that this would carry me through some very hard times in elementary school. If it were not for her kindness, I am very certain that things would be much worse in my life. And since I was contemplating taking revenge prior to accepting Jesus, things may have been worse for those that harmed me also.

I was able to tell Mrs. Locke about this during a time when I spoke at a church in Decatur, Michigan. You can listen to what I spoke about by following this link:
Jim Speaking at Decatur First Reformed Church – Christians for Christ Ministries

Post Script: Chris Locke went to be with our Lord and Saviour in November or 2021.

Kettle Point

Since I came to faith in Jesus Christ I have had several milestone events happen in my life. One of those was a trip that I took in the summer of 2000.

It was just after church on a breezy Sunday afternoon when I decided to travel to a place in Canada to do some windsurfing. Kettle Point was a place on the southern end of Lake Huron that was rather famous to windsurfers for having very large waves on windy days. This day was no exception and the waves were forecasted to be ten feet tall! Even though it was not normal for him, my brother decided to ride along to watch. In fact, I can never remember another day that he had gone windsurfing with me.

After the hour and a half journey there, I had an excellent day riding the large, smooth waves in the bay. Just before I was going to stop for the day, I came in for a brief rest. Then I decided to go out for one just more run. My brother was sitting in my truck reading due to the high wind and blowing sand. I had a very uneasy feeling as I was carrying the windsurf board back to the water. I was compelled to pray very hard for God to keep me safe on this final run of the day.

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I made a turn on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board that sent my board flying one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile the large wave that I had just finishing turning on crashed overtop of me with my sail! I let loose of my sail and soon realized that I was drowning. For a brief instant I hated to let go of my equipment but quickly decided that the equipment was replaceable. Even though I was wearing a short wet suit, I was unable to float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves. I got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air in between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray.

I began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real, and is difficult for me to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me.

As I was fighting for my life in Lake Huron that day, I made the vivid realization that God was in control. He was the Lord of the universe! Somehow during the events of the past several years, I missed that point. While I was drowning, I surrendered my will to God. I accepted that He was the Lord of my life. I had accepted Jesus as my Savior, but I had never really surrendered my will to God as my Lord. This was made clear to me while I was dying that day at Kettle Point.

Somehow, I came to realize that if I pulled on my wet suit, I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. So somehow, I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot-long mast with a flag attached. Between the huge waves I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and as one of the jet skis approached, I was spotted and rescued. I walked back up the beach praising God to tell my brother the amazing story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition except for the broken mast base.

Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario I had my first meal as a truly "born again" man. And although I am much more careful while windsurfing, I recognize now that God is in control of my life.

Why Did I Write This?

A few days after Christmas in 2002 a good friend of mine passed away due to a sudden heart attack. Greg Trojan, who was only 48 years old, had a wife and three daughters. This caused me to reflect even further upon my life. I asked myself "What is the purpose of my life?" My answer was, "To serve God and testify what He had done for me." Then I asked myself, is that what I have been doing for the past several years? What areas in my life do I really need to take a look at? Should I be sharing my testimony with more folks, so that they too can be transformed from the selfish person I was, into the more generous Christian that I am now?

Let me relate one final story that my little brother told me just after I came to faith in Jesus. Many

years ago my little brother accepted a challenge in his Bible study class at the Bible church he was attending. Everyone was asked to select the most difficult person that they knew to pray for in accepting Jesus as their Savior. He was asked to pick a person that was so wrapped up in the world that they would require an absolute miracle from God in order to come to faith in Jesus. My little brother selected me and prayed for many years. His prayers were finally answered.

Recently my little brother told me some additional details about this challenge. He told me that he asked himself what kind of Christian I would become if I ever came to faith in Jesus. I am now standing up to my own challenge and trying to become the Christian that God wants me to be by reaching out to other Roman Catholics and people that need to hear the Gospel. None of us should doubt that the saving power of Jesus can transform our lives.

God Bless You!

Invitation

Are you are being called by God to accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior? Do you recognize that you are a sinner, and Jesus is the only way to be saved? Are you willing to repent of your sins, and believe that Jesus can save you without your good works? The Bible says that God calls a person to faith in Jesus Christ. You must trust in Jesus' bloody death on the cross for your sins to save you from an eternity in Hell. God determined the method to be saved, not the traditions of man.

My Lord and my God, have mercy upon my soul, a sinner.[1] I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God.2 I believe that He died on the cross and shed His precious blood for the forgiveness of all my sins.3 I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit4 and that He sits on the right hand of God at this moment, hearing my confession of sin and this prayer.[5] I open up the door of my heart and I invite You into my heart, Lord Jesus.6 Wash all of my filthy sins away in the precious blood that You shed in my place on the cross at Calvary.7 You will not turn me away, Lord Jesus, You will forgive my sins and save my soul. I know because Your Word, the Bible says so.8 Your Word says that You will turn no one away, and that includes me.9 Therefore, I know that You have heard me, and I know that You have answered me, and I know that I am saved.10 And 1 thank You, Lord Jesus, for saving my soul, and I will show my

thankfulness by doing as You command and sin no more. 11

1. Psa. 51:5, Rom. 3:10-12, 23 2. Matt. 26:63-64, 27:54, Luke 1 :30-33, John 9:35-37, Rom. 1:3-4 3. Acts 4:12, 20:28, Rom. 3:25, / John 1:7, Rev. 5:9 4. Psa. 16:9-10, Matt. 28:5-7, Mark 16:9, John 2:19, 21, 10:17-18, 11:25, Acts 2:24, 3:15, Rom. 8:11, I Cor. 15:3-6 5. Luke 22:69, Acts 2:25-36, Heb. 10:12-13 6. Rom. 8:11, 1 Cor. 3:16, Rev. 3:20 7. Eph. 2:13-22, Heb. 9:22, 13:12, 20-2 1, / John 1:7, Rev. 1:5, 7:14 8. Matt. 26:28, Acts 2:2 1, 4:12, Eph. 1:7, CoI. 1:14 9. Rom. 10:13, Jas. 4:2-3 10. Heb. 11:6 11. John 8:11, 1 Cor. 15:10, Rev. 7:14, 22:14

Footnotes

1. Christian Research and Apologetics Ministry Web Page, March 15, 2003, http://www.carm.org/islam/salvation_by_works.htm

2. "William Faye and Ralph Hodge, "Sharing Jesus Without Fear" video guide Lifeway Press, Nashville, TN, 1997.

3. Warren E. Berkley and Jon W. Quinn, Expository Files 9.12, Word Wide Web, April 17, 2003, http://www.flash.net/~wberkley/efdec02.html#anchor65920
New link as of 5/2025 can be found by searching: Expository Files by Warren E. Berkley and Jon W. Quinn

4. World Wide Web, March 22, 2003, http://www.forgivenforlife.com/.

Dedication

This is dedicated in loving memory of Mr. Greg Trojan, man of God.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-11-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **9-11-2016**. This week in the first two readings we find some very important insights into the nature of God. This then helps us to come to a proper understanding of the Gospel lesson.

Last week we looked at the Gospel of Luke and I gave some insights into what it meant to carry our cross for Jesus. I mentioned that God says, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). One aspect of what Jesus meant when he said in this context to "keep his commandments" is

related to the First Commandment. This can be found Exodus 20 which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . ." (Exodus 20:3-5a). God through his great love and foreknowledge cautions us regarding the risks in even creating an image of a spiritual nature because this could lead us to attribute special powers to that purely physical object. This is exactly what we will see in the first reading when during the time that Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Law from God the people built a golden calf idol to worship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This reading is from Exodus and the context is during that 40 days that Moses spent on the mountain when God was giving him the Law. Since Moses was gone for such a long time the people returned to their former pagan worship practices that they had learned during their last four centuries in Egypt.

First Reading:

Exodus 32:7-14 NAS95 7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10 Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

In the introduction we mentioned how the First Commandment comes into view with the people building a molten calf and worshiping it. From my study of archeology, it is very possible that this was what was known as a "pedestal god" which featured a platform on the top of the icon onto which the god supposedly alighted. Giving them the benefit of a doubt along this line of thinking it's at least possible that their motives were to worship the true God Yahweh. However, we learn from the reading that God knew otherwise for He said the people have "quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them" (v. 8). Regardless of the people's motives their actions were a clear violation of the Commandment previously given to them. God's response was to ask Moses to move

away so that "My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (v. 10). But Moses pleaded with the Lord on the basis of His special covenantal relationship with them and He relented. The people were those "whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt" and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom God "swore by [Him]self [saying], "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever" (vv. 11b, 13).

Moses' plea for mercy, brought about because of the people's violation of the First Commandment, gives us some insight into the nature of God. Moses reminded God of what he did for the Hebrews by bringing them out of Egypt. He asked God to remember his faithful servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then recounted God's promise to make them a people as "numerous as the starts in the sky" and to give them the Promised Land. God's dialogue with Moses showed that the Father is longsuffering (patient), forgiving of sin, and will never forget his promises (mark this for later in the study). God cannot act against His nature.

The purpose of Moses' reminder wasn't of course for God, but for us! Moses' insights about the nature of God help us to understand our Father God and this understanding guides us in interpreting the rest of the Scripture. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 regarding the church there, "and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the **wrath** to come " (emphasis added). God forgives our sin and placates His wrath only through what Jesus did for us in dying for our trespasses. Our sins are many and include our worship of *contemporary* idols like money, sports, and etc. Perhaps we don't fall down before a golden calf but we do fall down when circumstances arise in our finances or our health.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Paul's First Letter to Timothy. The context is just after Paul's mention of the dangerous teaching of the false teachers who had made inroads in the church. Paul said, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith" (1 Timothy 1:3-4).

Second Reading:

1 Timothy 1:12-17 NAS95 12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so

that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Saint Paul said in the reading, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I was the foremost. But for that reason I was mercifully treated" (emphasis added). Then, "so that in me, as the foremost [of sinners], Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in Him for everlasting life" (emphasis added). We can see in the reading wo insights into the nature of God. God is merciful. God saves sinners, even the worst of them – as Paul expressed about himself. Why did Paul think that he was the worst of sinners? This was because he persecuted believers in the church to the point of death until his conversion. He understood God's mercy. Finally, God is patient. He goes to great lengths to deliver people from the consequences of their sin.

In the Gospel reading we will see these attributes of God beautifully illustrated, with His patience and mercy displayed through three parables.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel for today consists of three parables, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (prodigal son). Our emphasis today will be on the last one although one can easily see that the three parables share a common theme. Remember that all three parables in this section were addressed to the Pharisees, the group that we saw this past two Sundays. The Pharisees were a group of Jews that held to a strict interpretation of the Law of Moses. They were legalistic, false teachers who more concerned with outside appearances than with having a heart for pleasing God through faith. They loved money more than they love people (Luke 16:4).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." 11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to

his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

The first two parables concern the celebration that occurs when something that is lost is found. The meaning of these parables is the same and is revealed in verse 7. "[T]here will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Human souls are of tremendous value and all are born into a lost state of sinfulness at birth (Romans 3:23). It is only when souls are "found" by being "born from above" (John 3:3) that they are then transferred into the kingdom of God. Paul said about this, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

The third parable of the prodigal son begins with the younger son approaching his father and asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive. Though he was the younger son he could still could plan on receiving some inheritance but not as much as the firstborn son, and then only *after* his father died. So we could say that in some way when he asked his father for his inheritance he was wishing that he was already dead. The fact that his father went ahead and gave him the reward

shows the father's great generosity. Then his father let his son go off and "find himself" through wild living in a strange nation, evidently not a Jewish nation because they raised pigs. The father's act of letting his son go shows that the father also allows freedom to his son. Soon enough the son had squandered all of his money and became a slave by "hiring himself out." In today's terms we would call this an indentured servant, but the New Testament would use the term "slave." After squandering his money as a slave to sin the prodigal son became a slave on a hog farm. Even the touching of a hog would have been forbidden back in his home city under Jewish Law. Then the son reached a turning point, something that is known by the theological term "repentance." Since he was already a slave and wasn't being treated even with the basic necessity of food he figured that he would return to his father and become a slave for him so that at least he would have enough to eat. Also he knew the character of his father and that he could trust him as he worked there in contrast to the swine farm owner who didn't even provide him with any food. So the son began his return to his father and this opened the next chapter of the story.

When the son returned his father saw him in the distance and embraced him. But the son evidently had been rehearsing what he was going to say and quickly offered his heartfelt confession. Certainly the father heard this but went on with the festivities of welcoming home his lost son. Just like in the other parable the lost sheep was found, the lost coin was located and this was cause for celebration! In the midst of the festivities a wrinkle developed when the older son heard the commotion. This elder one expressed deep resentment for his younger brother, and told his father that he had always done the right thing. It seemed unfair to him that his brother should receive a party for returning after blowing his inheritance while he had diligently sacrificed all of these years. The father's reply sheds light on the depth of God's love, mercy, and patience. "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

The key players in the parable are obvious only to a person whose heart has been enlightened to the truths of God. The father is God the Father. Earlier in the study we found that the Father is longsuffering (patient), forgiving of sin, and will never forget his promises (to care for his family). The older son represents the Pharisees. The Pharisee like son didn't trust God's heart and instead saw God as miserly and not generous. The older son missed out on relationship with God yet he was living under the umbrella of His provision. This eldest son believed he was righteous through his good works and sacrifice. As a result of all of his false beliefs he built a heart of resentment and entitlement against his father as well as his younger brother. The youngest son represents a believer in Jesus Christ who trusts in the provision of his Father. He, like all true believers before and after him, express a heart of brokenness, desperation for God and humility.

The big idea in this parable is God is a lavishly forgiving God who goes to great lengths to save people. God gives people freedom to make mistakes but continues to reach out with his grace ready to bring repentant people back to his kingdom. In contrast the Pharisees have self-righteousness at the root of their beliefs. This leads to legalism in which they focus upon the letter of the law but not on the spirit of the law, thus missing relationship with the father. Legalism looks at outward

standards of behavior without addressing the heart's motivation. Jesus warns that we can have all of the right religious terminology without the right heart attitude towards him when he said in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Which son are you more like? Where have you placed your faith? Have you stopped depending upon your own righteousness and confessed your need to the Father of His mercy? Or do you identify with the older brother, the Pharisee, who always did everything "right" in this life and yet distanced himself from needing the mercy of the Father? Saint John said in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you are in the former category praise God for what He has done for you. If you are not sure then reach out to God for He is a longsuffering God, patient, wishes that none would perish but all would come to the knowledge of the truth. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. This week's readings from the Bible highlighted God's heart of mercy, patience and forgiveness. How have you experienced these attributes in your own relationship with God?

2. Do you have a prodigal son in your family or know of one among your friends or relatives? Is their story one of redemption or are they still working as a slave for a pig farmer as in the Gospel lesson today? What can you learn from this prodigal person?

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/091116.cfm

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 132

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Keywords:

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Prodigal Son, forgiveness, grace, idolatry, Moses, golden calf, First Commandment

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-04-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **9-4-2016**. This week we learn about forgiveness from Paul's Letter to Philemon. Then we study Jesus' teaching on the cost of being His disciple. Have you ever acted like an idiot? We are going to talk about that today in the context of forgiveness.

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 Book of Philemon is a story about a servant named Onesimus who having stolen from his master Philemon met up with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Upon meeting with Paul, Onesimus' heart was changed by God and he repented of his former sins. The Book opens with Paul's address to Onesimus who was obviously a fellow believer and church leader and whom he called "our beloved brother and fellow worker" (Philemon 1). Today's reading is a portion of Paul's appeal to Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus back.

Second Reading:

Note: Includes verses 11-12 that were omitted from the reading.

Philemon 1:9-17 NAS95 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you –since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus– 10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

Paul made a heartfelt appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a "beloved brother" (v. 16) for the sake of love (v. 9). Paul told of how useful Onesimus' ministry had been to him in prison and appealed to Philemon to accept his former servant back because during the time Onesimus had been gone he had become a brother in the Lord. Paul asked Philemon to do so willingly if he "regard[ed] [him] as a partner" and to "accept him as you would me" (v. 17). We know that as a function of Paul's leadership position in the church he could have commanded Philemon to forgive his servant, but rather he asked him to do so without compulsion. We also know from looking past today's reading that Paul promised to pay back anything that Onesimus owed (Philemon 18-19).

Each week in mass when the Lord's prayer is recited you say these very important words from the Lord Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6:12, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." With this in mind, the big idea in the reading is God's calling to forgive people of their trespasses against them, and especially their Christian brothers and sisters because of their positions relative to the Lord. Paul's appeal to Philemon provided an excellent illustration of forgiveness in action. Although he appealed to Philemon on the basis of grace (unmerited favor), he also recognized the physical debts incurred by Onesimus and offered to pay for these expenses. Sin has consequences, and although they can be forgiven there still may be consequences that have to be taken care of.

I remember one after when I was visiting a friend in Florida to escape the cold up north I took

advantage of a windy day to load up my windsurfing equipment in my friend's very large van to go sailing on the ocean. After we pulled into a parking spot next to a nice retired couple parked there in a nice but older four door sedan. As I began to open the door the wind was much stronger than I anticipated and as it was coming from directly behind the van the door became a giant sail which then propelled itself into this nice couple's very clean looking car. As I got out to survey the damage by friend called me something like an idiot and I got control of the door and spoke to the man about the damage. The door from our van had placed a small dent in his door. I told him how sorry I was and explained after a short while to please give me his name and address so I could pay for the repairs. I also left him with my name and address and tried not to let this occasion ruin both of our days. He was very gracious and although he did give me his address seemed quite pleasant about the whole thing. The moment I got home I sat down and wrote an apology to him and asked him to send me the repair bill. Some weeks later I got a nice note back from him thanking me and saying that he did not want me to cover any of the repair costs. I was deeply moved by his compassion and have always remembered what happened and how gracious he was to me even though I acted as my friend said, "as an idiot."!

As I have reflected upon the parking lot incident over the years, it has caused me to be more compassionate with other people's mistakes. Jesus said, "forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37e), foreshadowing the ultimate forgiveness that would come through His offering of Himself on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. The is one of the main "take aways" that we can walk away with from Paul's message. The more we grow as Christians the more that we learn to forgive others in the same way that our Father in heaven as forgiven us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we continue in the Gospel of Luke and come to some more difficult passages. Often times we may assume that Jesus' teaching are good moral messages. But again this week we move into teachings by God which demand a response in how we live out our daily lives. The title above this section in my Bible is "The Cost of Discipleship."

Gospel Reading:

Luke 14:25-33 NAS95 25 Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, 26 "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28 For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of

peace. 33 So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."

It's obvious from examining the whole of Scripture that we should not literally hate our father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even ourselves as this says if taken literally. What Jesus means is that we are called to love him above everyone else, even ourselves. Love plays out through our thoughts and also our actions. Our love for Jesus plays out in a myriad of ways through our daily making of decisions grounded in scriptural principles. The most basic of all scriptural principles which God calls us to keep are the Ten Commandments, even the hard ones from that short list. We can find the entire list of commandments in Exodus chapter 20 in the Old Testament. Turn there yourself and read them as a refresher. Verses 3-5 read, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord God am a jealous God." How many times are we tempted to rely upon some physical representation of God to help us feel His presence? But we are commanded not to even make such an object. God in His wisdom knows that we are weak and to create such a thing would quickly become a stumbling stone to us. How far any of us can push this commandment is unknown at least until we begin to go past a point of no return. Yes, we reflect upon the cross in our churches, but we don't worship the cross.

In the next section of Jesus' teaching he brings up the concept of carrying our own cross. The Scripture is clear in Matthew 11:30 that "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus said outright that the burden of being a disciple wasn't a heavy one, so is he contradicting Himself? Clearly not. What Jesus is saying is explained in the subsequent section where He tells of the wisdom of a builder to make a plan before he builds a tower and a king planning a battle. Jesus disciples didn't understand that he would be crucified on a cross, even if He had already told them about this prophesy. When we read this section and hear the word "cross" our mind jumps to Jesus on dying on the cross. But in context Jesus was referring to what the disciples would have understood about the cross. They would have understood that the cross beam was something which was carried on the way to a person's own execution. The cost of the cross for that person was their own death, and Jesus was foreshadowing the fact that for many of His disciples the cost of their cross would be their lives. This remains true in many parts of the world, and especially in the Middle East. In light of the recent unrest in Syria and Egypt many Christians are proving Jesus' prophesy to be true. It's likely that for most of us we won't have to give our lives for our faith in Jesus. Carrying the cross for Jesus in our lives is a bit more complicated as to what God calls us to do for Him through our daily thoughts and actions.

Here is the bottom line, what Jesus is saying is this. **Consider the cost of being a disciple in various circumstances in advance of them happening so that when these conditions do arise you will be ready with a well-reasoned response especially in terms when you will have to answer in an instant.** You may wonder how it could be possible to consider every possible circumstance that might happen. It's not, and the Scripture says in 1 Timothy 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

The message again is to be prepared in advance so when it happens we are ready. Consider the most common situations that **could** arise. In today's age that means confronting the issue of homosexuality, same sex marriage, gay rights, single moms, and divorce – such issues as we should expect to find around us on a given day.

I was managing a computer consulting company and one of my clients was a multi-national telephone company. The manager of a certain department with whom we did about a half a million dollars of business a year came to me and asked if I would make a donation to a certain charity called the Triangle Foundation. This organization is an advocate for the gay, lesbian and transgender community. He never implied that by not making this donation our business relationship would be harmed, but there was of course a strong chance that this would happen. What did I do? I searched the Bible and found that it treated homosexuality as a sin, but not necessarily as any greater sin than the other ones listed including drunkenness, lust, and pride. I liked this particular customer and he had always been fair with me, but making a donation to a group which advocated a certain sin greatly troubled me. In a sense I could have been asked to send a donation to a group which supported rights for men who chose to view pornography. I prayed about the situation for a long time and after much discussion with one of the other managers decided that we would not make the donation. I decided to tell our customer that we were choosing not to make the donation but did not give a reason for our decision. To his credit the customer did not push the point and dropped the whole matter. A few months later the employee left the company and that was the end of the matter. Was this some sort of test that God allowed for me?

As Christians, there will undoubtedly be times during which God will require us to count the cost. Sometimes it may be obvious to us, like if confronted by an Islamic terrorist asking us to deny the Lord Jesus. At other times it may be less obvious, like paying the repair costs to a car you hit because the wind caught your door even though it wasn't explicitly your fault. Perhaps you will run into an ethical situation at work. To use an illustration from one of our readers (we are praying for you sir), maybe you would receive inside information about the price of your competitors bid before you making your own. Or, using an illustration from my world of pay per click advertising, using a competitors trademarked name in your online ad in order to draw them away from that competitive product to your own.

Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets" (Luke 6:22-23). Jesus went before us as the extreme example of divine forgiveness. Jesus not only sinned those who sinned against Him but also bore the penalty for our sins. Through His example, we can persevere in our Christian lives to forgive those who sin against us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Can you think of a time when you graciously and boldly forgave an "idiot" in your life? In what

ways does knowing how God forgave you of your sins (past, present, and future) help you to forgive others?

2. When was a time that you encountered a situation in which you had to count the cost of being a Christian? How does what you learned from Jesus today help to inform you about your past choice? In light of what you learned, what would you have done differently?

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/090416.cfm

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 129

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-28-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **8-28-2016**. This week we examine the Book of Hebrews where we see the difference between the Old and New Covenants. We close with Jesus' teaching the Pharisees about humility, a message that all of us need to hear.

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 second reading continues the study from last week in the Book of Hebrews. The context of the reading is following the author's teaching on the necessity of a believer to pursue peace and sanctification, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14b). The writer provided the counter example of ungodly Esau, "who sold his own birthright for a single meal" (v. 16b). Today's reading moves to the subject of the ways in which God deals with believers in the Old versus New Covenants.

Second Reading:

Note: The text below includes verses 20-21 and 24b-ff that were omitted from the reading.

Hebrews 12:18-24 NAS95 18 For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken

to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

The author expressed the great contrast that exists between God's covenantal relationship with believers in the Old and New Covenants. The idea expressed is the difference between the terrors of God revealed on Mount Sinai versus the peace found on Mount Zion. Believers in the Lord Jesus as a part of the New Covenant can approach the throne of God with boldness in contrast to the fearful manner in which the Jews experienced God at Mount Sinai in the Old (see also Hebrews 4:16). The writer expressed how as New Testament believers we come not to a mountain burning with fire but rather Mount Zion, the holy city of God (v. 22a). This spiritual city consists of "myriads of angels" (v. 22c), "the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (v. 23a), God the Judge of all (v. 23b), "the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (v. 23d), and "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (v. 24a). The New Covenant provides a qualitatively different relationship between God and man through the "mediatorship" of Jesus Christ. This covenant is much better than the old one because through the blood of Jesus Christ believers are made perfect without the consciousness of sin that perpetually existed in the Old Covenant. We find this stated earlier in the Book. "For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?" (Hebrews 10:1-2).

The reading shows us how our changeless God revealed Himself through two different covenants. The Mosaic Covenant was delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai through "blazing fire, "darkness," "gloom," a "whirlwind," "trumpet and the sounds of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them" (v. 18). This contrast is nowhere more evident in that of the blood of Abel versus the blood of Jesus in verse 24. Although God accepted Abel's sacrifice because it was offered by faith, the blood of Jesus Christ is infinitely greater than that of Abel because Christ's blood atoned for the sins of the whole world. As New Testament believers, we look forward to seeing Mount Zion, the holy city.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we return to Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke that we saw last week. And again we see some more about the group called the Pharisees in the Gospel teaching, just like the last week. Perhaps what may be helpful here is a bit of background about this group of Jewish people. The Pharisees were middle-class common men that were not necessarily educated like the other group

known as the Sadducees. The Pharisees differed in their beliefs from the Sadducees in that they believed in life after death, in miracles, and also in angelic beings. They believed that the word of God was inspired and sought to hold very strictly to the tradition of the Law as given by Moses in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch. However, they taught falsely that their oral traditions held equal authority to Scripture. Jesus warned the Pharisees about these and other false teachings in His message of the seven woes found in Matthew 23:1-36. In our day, we must endeavor to always measure and test our own religious traditions and beliefs against the unchanging Scriptures.

Now we will examine the context of today's reading from Saint Luke. Here we find Jesus dining at the home of a certain famous Pharisee, likely a member of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin. Could it have been someone like Saint Paul, who was a Pharisee himself? Anyway the Scripture says that the "people" were observing him carefully. It would seem that they were trying to find some fault in Jesus, to trip him up, to find a reason for which they could bring him to trial. It would also seem that other Pharisees were present. So as Jesus often did he told a parable. When you hear the word "parable" I suggest you think of it this way. The word means quite literally "to throw alongside." So think of a parable as a story is thrown alongside to show you some certain spiritual truth. Be careful not to try and make a parable walk on all fours, but just try to get out of it the single spiritual truth. Also, be careful to not take it literally if it isn't meant to be taken that way, and we can determine if that is the case by looking at the context.

Consider this parable that Jesus gave directly to the Pharisees and also the context as you read it. Imagine yourself sitting with the Jesus among the Pharisees, a group who strived to please God through their observance of the Law and holding to *their* oral traditions. We need to also carefully consider that the reading for this week omitted verses 2-6 in Luke chapter 14. This is unfortunate because these verses very clearly describe the context of Jesus' teaching. Looking at the missing five verses, we find that the audience also included a man suffering from some abnormal swelling of his body. The Pharisees proceed to ask Jesus whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath which was the day all of this took place, Saturday (the Jews' Sabbath was always the last day of the week not on Sunday as is celebrated by Christians). Jesus responded to their question with a question (as Jesus' often did!). He asked the Pharisees what would they do if their child or ox fell into a hole on the Sabbath, would they pull them out immediately? The implied answer is of course **yes**. Anyone knows through pure common sense that you would pull your child or ox out of hole on the Sabbath Day. Jesus then took a hold of the man and healed him on the spot, something which no doubt caused great anger to the Pharisees. They were likely thinking something like, "You just broke the Sabbath Law, and for this lowly scum of a man with a bloated face and who is ceremonially unclean." The question is, what was this man with dropsy even doing there at the prominent Pharisee's house? According to the Law he would be ruled unclean and unable to enter the temple, but here he was at the home of the prominent Pharisee. Were the Pharisees not already bending their rules to allow this unclean man to be there at the meal? Or were they being hypocritical, or was the man able to wander in because of the typically open configuration of the ancient near eastern home? The text does not say. Now with this context in mind let's look at the parable.

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Gospel Reading:

Luke 14:1 NAS95 1 It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely.

Omitted Verses:

Luke 14:2-6 NAS95 2 And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. 3 And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" 4 But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. 5 And He said to them, "Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" 6 And they could make no reply to this.

Luke 14:7-14 NAS95 7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. 12 And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. 13 But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"

Jesus' parable was a frontal attack upon the Pharisees who "love[d] the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places" (Luke 11:43). Because the Pharisees were exalting themselves over everyone else, their problem was one of pride. The central taught by Jesus in this passage was God's calling to be humble. By humbling yourself to help those that cannot help themselves you will be repaid in heaven, but the reward may not be obvious in this life. Jesus was upsetting the apple cart of the Pharisees' world by suggesting that the lowly people in this world, like the man with the terrible dropsy, would be exalted in the coming kingdom of heaven. Jesus demonstrated His own humility through the healing of the man with dropsy (Luke 14:3) in spite of the fact that He knew it would anger the Pharisees with whom He would soon be dining. He then went on to give them teaching about why being humble was so important.

Read again the section in the reading regarding this upside down world that Jesus is teaching

regarding His kingdom. "For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 11). God is the only one we may exalt any of us, although the Pharisees exalted themselves above everyone else, even above their sick brother.

To apply today's reading in our lives we can pray to God to help us to see ourselves as servants to those people that don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can ask God to show us how to see ourselves "washing their dirty feet," helping to heal their sickness, and serving them by praying for them. We can ask God to give us the courage to speak to them about the forgiveness of sins that is given only through believing that Jesus Christ died one single time on the cross for their sins, through a sacrifice than can never be repeated.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Can you think of a time this past week when I considered myself as better than someone else? What was the circumstance? In what ways does Jesus speak to you from what you learned in the Gospel message?

2. What is one thing that you can change in regards to this teaching of Jesus on the necessity of being humble?

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/082816.cfm

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 126

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_08-28-2016.pdfDownload

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-21-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **8-21-2016**. This week our first reading is from the final chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah. The passage is prophetic in nature, that is, it touches on events in the last days of God's plan for redemption. The second reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews deals with the very difficult subject of discipline and how God uses it in the lives of His children. Finally, we read more about Jesus' teaching ministry as He traveled through Israel. In this passage He includes some very hard lessons that are important for us to understand.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The book of Isaiah is like a small Bible. Chapters 1-39 speak of Israel in the midst of the nations (like the Old Testament, consisting of 39 books in many versions). Chapters 40-66 speak of comfort in the revelation of Christ (like the New Testament's 26 books). This last section begins with John the Baptist, climaxes in chapter 53 about the sacrifice of Christ, and ends with the Millennial Kingdom. Today's portion was written, perhaps, to educate Israel concerning the distant future with respect to the Messianic Kingdom of God and ultimate restoration of the nation.

First Reading:

Isaiah 66:18-21 NAS95 18 "For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory. 19 I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. 20 Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. 21 I will also take some of them for priests and for Levites," says the LORD.

In these verses Isaiah moves from speaking of God's judgment upon those who are unfaithful to Him to announce a future gathering of all nations. Representatives will come into God's presence and be introduced to His great glory. Then, they will be sent out to the nations of the world who have not known God. Someone has called this the Great Commission for Israel (similar to the Great Commission to the Church in Matthew 28). These "missionaries" will declare the glory of God to the nations.

The result will be a great migration, multitudes coming to Jerusalem, described as "My holy mountain." The text tells us that they will come in a variety of ways: "on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels." Notably, God will choose some of these new believers to be priests and to be used in serving capacities for God.

One might well ask, "When will these things come to pass?" The answer would require a very careful study of prophetic Scriptures—both Old and New Testament texts—to be definitive. The Bible often speaks of a great tribulation in the end times, and many believe it is the saints (believers) who come out of that tribulation period who will be the messengers to bring to God those who had not yet heard of His love and grace and who, as a result of this witness, come into a relationship of faith in God.

No matter the timing of this prophecy, the recurring theme in this passage is God's glory. What is God's glory? "Glory" is a very difficult word to define because it does not represent a concrete object. It represents a quality or essence, much like the word "beauty." God's glory is the reflection of His beautiful and perfect essence, the manifestation of His unique and sought after presence. Glory is the positive reference to His attractive reputation, which is manifested in who He is and displayed in what He does. We get a sense of God's glory by the loving dynamic within the three persons of the Godhead, with His generous and gracious interaction with humankind (as recorded in Scripture), and in His display of exotic beauty and intricate design in nature (general revelation). God's glory has been on display for all to see in creation, so that Saint Paul says: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse . . . Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man . . . " (Romans 1:20,22-23).

Responding to God's glory and living in light of this reality is an important part of a life well-lived, a life that has eternal qualities to it. In the passage of Isaiah, it is the distinct privilege of people to declare His fame and reflect His glory to those who do not know. In our lives, we have the privilege to live for God's fame, and not our own on a daily basis. We can choose to order our lives around giving glory to God, or we can choose to exchange this opportunity in order to glorify self, honor the finite things of this world, or value what was created over the Creator Himself. Though the results are not always immediate, this passage reminds us that God's glory is worth pursuing.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The major theme of Hebrews is the pre-eminence of Christ. It involves some very important and deep theology, but it also includes very practical ideas about Christian living. In fact, the last three chapters give valuable teaching about walking in faith (ch. 11), walking with hope (ch. 12), and walking in love (ch. 13). Today's reading gives a helpful lesson about the value and necessity of discipline, which often may be painful but always serves God's good purpose.

Second Reading:

Note: Includes verses 8-10 omitted from the reading.

Hebrews 12:5-13 NAS95 5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; 6 FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. 12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The section begins with a reminder that discipline comes from God, and it happens in the lives of all Christians ("every son," v. 6). In fact, the very reality that God disciplines someone proves that person's sonship; he indeed belongs to God, because parents don't discipline someone else's children. It should be noted here that the words in the text express discipline and chastisement, not judgment and punishment. There is a difference.

Most people do not like pain and suffering, and we pray fervently to be rid of them. But, whatever the reason for the pain—whether it's the discipline of God or the consequences of natural infirmities, God can use the suffering for His good purposes. One writer, who has suffered a debilitating disease

for many years, wrote: "If my parents could have stopped me from being afflicted by this disease, they would have. But God didn't, and He's the perfect Father, knowing what will make me a better person. Because of their love, my parents would more likely have insulated me from some of the greatest lessons of life that I could learn only through my suffering. Because of God's love for me, He dare not withhold the pain and suffering."

But why is it necessary for God to discipline His children? What are God's motives? Unfortunately, many of us have been disciplined by an earthly parent out of impatience, sometimes to show us who's boss, or to get us to cooperate with their plan with no interest in our nurture. Some of the tactics that earthly parents wrongly use are guilt and shame, producing in us a fear of punishment and a surface compliance to the desires of the one with authority. If we view God like we view our earthly parents, then we have some soul work to do in order to trust God in the midst of His discipline.

God does not discipline His children in order to get begrudging compliance or in order to get even with wrongs we have done. God lovingly disciplines His children to help shape a worldview in our hearts that pries our fingers off of self-reliance, independence, and autonomous pride; and in exchange, opens our arms to embrace a God-reliant walk with Him. Saint Paul wrote of a time in his life where he was under so much affliction that he even despaired of life itself. As a result of this time of discipline, Paul internalized a deep reliance on God, saying: "we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

In our immaturity (just like a child), we do not know how much we need our Father. We often live as if we are in charge and give a quick nod to God when we want to do well on an exam, need a new job, or feel like we are in a bind. But God, in His kindness, knows that this is low-level living in Him. Through having the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath us, He helps us to live in light of reality and recognize that we cannot do life on our own. In our disorientation and desolation, we desperately reach out for God's abiding presence and find our consolation in Him (not in our sense of control or carefully arranged circumstances). We begin to internalize His value system in our soul by living in dependence on Him, which is a "severe mercy" on God's part. God's motive is to bring life that is truly life (John 10:10) to us in the midst of His strategic and loving discipline.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

We hear a lot today about intolerance. We are urged to be tolerant of almost everyone and everything that someone might believe or do. Moral standards of right and wrong seem to have evaporated in modern society, and common sense has been replaced with personal preference. But, there is a standard; there is a right way, and everything contrary to that must be wrong. Jesus and Christianity are often criticized because of their claim that there is only one way to God. Today's reading emphasizes that truth in the teaching of Jesus Himself, who claimed to be that one way (John 14:6).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 13:22-30 NAS95 22 And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. 23 And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' 26 Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; 27 and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out. 29 And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. 30 And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last."

Luke records important lessons from Jesus' teaching as the Lord makes His way to Jerusalem, where He is to suffer and die. He had told His disciples about His destiny, although they did not fully understand His plan of salvation until after the promised resurrection. Apparently, some had understood His teaching about the necessity to come to God through Him, and one asks Him specifically about it. Are there, he wonders, only a few that will be saved? Jesus answers by describing the entrance to faith as being "the narrow door." His further comments can leave no doubt about the exclusiveness of the way to God.

Not all who feel entitled to enter can do so. The "head of the house," no doubt a reference to God the Father, surely has the right to open and close the door to His own house, and knocking on the door will not achieve entrance if you are unknown to the householder. He makes it clear that past physical association with Him (eating and drinking, for example) is not sufficient. People also claim that they listened to Him teaching in their streets, but this is still not sufficient. Those who are actually entitled to enter are those who enter through the "narrow door." What is this narrow door that Jesus is referring to?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus answers the question by metaphorically referring to himself as the door to the sheepfold. Inside the sheepfold, the sheep are safe and find refuge. He said, "Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:7-10). It is clear from this and other parts of Scripture (John 14:6, Acts 4:12) that Jesus is the only entry point to eternal life.

It is clear, then, that apart from genuine trust in the grace of Jesus and His finished work at the cross, evidenced by His resurrection, there is no salvation. He indeed is the only way to God. Those who reject the opportunity to trust Him will weep and gnash their teeth when they see Israel's

fathers and prophets in the kingdom and they themselves are left out. These words should bring them to repentance so they will be able to "recline at the table in the kingdom of God." The last—the down-and-outers, the ones who do not feel entitled—will be first in the kingdom because they have accepted the lordship of Jesus in their lives.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The pinnacle of God's glory is displayed in His work of salvation accomplished through Christ's perfect life, His death and His resurrection. How has God's glory changed you from pursuing the corruptible things of this finite world to orienting your life around the incorruptible beauty of God's nature? Where do you see God's glory being displayed in your life's choices, attitudes, and values? Where would you like to see God's continued work in your life and through your life to reflect His glory?

2. How did your parents discipline you as a child? What tactics/motives reflected the heart of God and what tactics/motives did not reflect the heart of God? What parts of that experience do you need to exchange in order to embrace the loving discipline of God in your life? What seasons of discipline do you need to revisit in your mind and mentally process with this new perspective of God's heart for internalizing His value system in you? How can this perspective on God's discipline being part of our sonship be an encouragement for you and those you love to stay faithful to God in the midst of suffering?

3. Since Jesus was speaking metaphorically of entering through the narrow door, what does it mean to do this spiritually? How does this metaphor get lived out in your life? It might require a first-time decision to follow Him if you have never articulated your allegiance to Christ or it might require daily moments of trust to show your allegiance to Him as Lord. What would it be worth to you to recline at the table in the kingdom of God and be with the Old Testament saints for eternity? How might you grow in valuing this eternal reward over short-term gratification that gets in the way of reflecting God's glory.

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/082116.cfm

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 120

Source(s):

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

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-14-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **8-14-2016**. This week the three readings follow the theme of persecution of believers and the need for us to assess our allegiances and alliances with those other than God. As believers we should expect persecution in light of the fact that others who walked with God before us experienced these things.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is the harsh imprisonment of Jeremiah, for the second time. This was as a result of the administration's "kill the messenger" approach as God brought the truth to southern kingdom of Judah about their certain destruction at the hands of the Chaldeans unless they repented. After he had been held in the dungeon (Jeremiah 37:15-16), King Zedekiah sent for him

there and spoke with him before releasing him to the "court of the guardhouse" (v. 21). In the reading we will learn about the increasingly harsh treatment given to God's prophet Jeremiah. In reading the text we can begin to understand why Jeremiah became to be known as the "weeping prophet."

First Reading:

Jeremiah 38:4-10 NAS95 4 Then the officials said to the king, "Now let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people but rather their harm." 5 So King Zedekiah said, "Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you." 6 Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchijah the king's son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud. 7 But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin; 8 and Ebed-melech went out from the king's palace and spoke to the king, saying, 9 "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the city." 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, "Take thirty men from here under your authority and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the cistern before he dies."

Zedekiah's ungodly officials advised the king to put Jeremiah to death because of his discouraging words (v. 4). In their wicked eyes Jeremiah committed treason by supposedly weakening the war against the invading Chaldeans by calling for them to surrender rather than to resist. At this point the king surrendered Jeremiah into the custody of the "officials," using the term loosely. Once King Zedekiah surrendered his authority over God's prophet the people then took drastic actions against Jeremiah by lowering him into a cistern, an action obviously intended to bring about his death. It took the actions of a Gentile, Ebed-melech (whose name means "servant of the king") to bring about Jeremiah's rescue.

There are many parallels between the suffering that Jeremiah endured to that of Jesus during His earthly ministry. Jeremiah, a type of Christ, pointed the way to the future suffering of our Lord Jesus as the hands of the officials of His day. Because they persecuted God and His prophets, we should also expect persecution in our lives when we act against the ungodly officials in our day. Stephen said just before his own death, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become" (Acts 7:52).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study in the Book of Hebrews and picks up after the section

known as the "Hall of Faith." Today's reading relates to what we read about in Jeremiah concerning hostility against believers of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 12:1-4 NAS95 1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;

Taking into account what we learned from chapter 11 ("therefore," v. 1a), we are called to focus upon the ultimate goal of Jesus Christ and forsake our sinful ways (vv. 1-2). We are to do this through using Jesus as our example. By focusing upon Jesus' illustration of resisting sin we too can be faithful in accomplishing the purpose that God has for us. However, in the same way that Jesus and the prophets were persecuted we too should expect to experience trials when we stand up for the things of God. The author of Hebrews makes it abundantly clear that by taking the testimony of Jesus along with the great cloud of witnesses into account we can persist through the inevitable trials that will come upon us. The reading closes by saying that we haven't taken outrageous measures to eliminate sin in our lives (v. 4). This points the way to the subsequent teaching where the author explains how God brings chastening into the lives of believers because as sons of God this correction is for our ultimate good (Hebrews 12:5-11). In the same way that God allowed persecution in the life of Jeremiah, He may also allow it in our lives. As we move to the Gospel reading we will see some similar teaching from Jesus on the need to assess our personal alliances in light of God's plans for us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke follows a theme I will call "Forsaking allegiances and alliances for Jesus." Jesus was clear that His ministry would be one of division. For John said in the infamous verse regarding the division of the people over Jesus, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). In today's reading we see another of Jesus' 6-6-6 moments, this time in the teaching to His disciples after Peter drew near to him amongst the crowds to ask Him a question. Peter had asked Jesus regarding His telling of the Parable of the Wedding Feast whether this parable was addressed to just His disciples or to the crowd as a whole. As Jesus was fond of doing he didn't answer Peter's question directly but did so by asking another question, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?" (Luke 12:42). Jesus then provided yet another parable about the absent master and the behavior of the slaves while he was away (Luke 12:43-48). Jesus' teaching at this point culminated with an extremely important principle. The

punishment of the wicked will be according the degree of knowledge that the person possessed (v. 48). This was obviously addressed to the Pharisees among the crowd, and Judas the betrayer who would have been among the twelve disciples. By application the teaching leading up to today's reading brings with the idea of everyone's call to exercise godly stewardship of the resources which they have been given. The call to godly stewardship may even involve the forsaking of friends and family for the sake of the Gospel.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 12:49-53 NAS95 49 "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! 51 Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; 52 for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

In the very first season of the television series *Survivor*, Richard Hatch orchestrated the idea of a voting alliance. The "Tagi Alliance" as it was called, was a brilliant strategy that paved the way for future seasons of the program and showed the necessity of working together to accomplish the impossible in dire conditions. One of the most notable things about an alliance in general and this one in particular is that it excludes members outside of it. As viewers saw in the series, the Tagi Alliance resulted in considerable controversy with non-members as the show played out. In this case the issue that comes into play is that as the season winds down the ultimate conclusion requires the banishment of alliance members from the island. In today's reading we see how Jesus warned about the dangers of stubbornly clinging to an alliance which in effect makes a pledge of allegiance to someone other than God.

Jesus told His disciples along with large crowd how from now on families would be divided because of Him. By application, true followers of Jesus are called to examine their alliances and allegiances and be willing to forsake anything that leads them away from following God's plan for their lives. This may include stepping back from any relationship in which the other person attempts to lead you astray spiritually while praying for the opening of that person's eyes to the light of the Gospel.

Muslim background believers (MBB's) are one shining example of a group whom would readily identify with Jesus' teaching as well as what we learned about persecution in the first reading. Many MBB's have been forced to forsake their mother and father and even their own lives in order to follow the true teaching found only in the God of the Bible. Other readers of Mass Notes will also be able to identify with Jesus' teaching when they too found themselves marginalized or even outright reject by family members (and others) for their faith in Jesus. All three of today's readings point to a single verse from the second reading in Hebrews. "For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3). God calls us to focus upon Him to the extent that we are willing to assess any alliances or allegiances we

may have that call us away from His plan. This may mean leaving the fellowship of a certain church or losing a relationship with a loved one. Through it all God calls us to never lose our focus upon Him.

Would you be willing to share your testimony with us for posting on the web site about the particular alliance or allegiance you were forced to break?

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways does the things that happened to Jeremiah in today's reading mirror the Lord Jesus Christ?

2. What is a particular situation in your life in which you felt called by God to break an alliance or allegiance in order to accomplish God's purpose?

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/081416.cfm

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 120

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-07-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **8-7-2016**. This week we learn about the Hall of Faith in the Book of Hebrews and about Jesus' call to serve Him while He is away in Heaven.

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. You can read that online for yourself at http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/080716.cfm. In the future Mass Notes may include an analysis of these readings once proper copyright permission has been obtained for inclusion of that text.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The reading from the Book of Hebrews is from the section referred to as the "Hall of Faith" or "Faith Hall of Fame." The reading records the faith-filled events of some very important men and women of the faith. After reading the definition of faith in the first verse, look for repeating patterns in the second section.

Second Reading: The verses (3 – 7) omitted from the reading are set apart below.

Hebrews 11:1-2 NAS95 1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval.

Omitted:

Heb 11:3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

Heb 11:4 ¶ By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Heb 11:5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.

Heb 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Heb 11:7 By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Hebrews 11:8-19 NAS95 8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

Prior to launching into the Hall of Faith, the author provided the definition of this very important term, one that we may easily take for granted during the reading of the Bible. They say, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (v. 1). Read this definition again, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." As Christians, we understand intuitively that the context of faith is God. However, faith isn't an object in itself, rather the object of faith is God, for having spiritual faith in anyone but God is vain. For nonbelievers may make statements like, "I have faith that I will get through this" and then rather be guided by their circumstances than God, although God is sovereign over all people and events in the world.

The second section of today's reading begins with, "For by it the men of old gained approval" and then moves to using the repeated phrase, "by faith [name]" followed by a commendation of the person's faith-filled actions. In the omitted verses we see that this follows the general chronology of the Bible beginning first with Abel (v. 4), then Enoch (v. 5) and Noah (v. 7). The reading then moves to person known as the "father of faith," Abraham in verse 8. Saint Paul affirmed this commendation of Abraham in Romans 4:16. Although we see that Abraham certainly wasn't the first to walk by faith in God, he along with his wife, was the one to whom God dedicated a substantial section for commendation in the Hall of Faith. The first portion of verse 8 reads, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by . . ." The subsequent verses chronicle his and Sarah's faithful actions including leaving his known land to go to an unknown place. In verse 17, we see how Abraham passed perhaps the ultimate test of his faith by his willingness to offer up his one and only son as a sacrifice to God. This example of faith lived out by Abraham closely parallels God's willingness to offer His Son Jesus on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. In Abraham's case God stopped short of requiring the ultimate sacrifice of Isaac by providing the lamb himself for the sacrifice. However, we know that in the case of Jesus God provided the ultimate sacrifice through the sacrifice of His one and only Son. We read in the Book of John, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

So much can be said about the reading that concludes with, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises" (v. 13a). How faithful were the men and women of God by following what He told them to do but without them ever receiving the promises that He made to them! The "Hall of Faith" stands as a testimony as to how we as men and women of the faith are also called to walk by faith in God's promises without expecting to see the ultimate answers during our natural lives. God calls us to walk in faith the same way as the biblical examples did, not only just the ones listed in today's reading. We do this through understanding God's promises made to us and walk by taking both baby steps and even giant steps of faith along the way as we sense God's calling. God may call us to leave our known land and proceed to a place with which we are not familiar. Or He may call us to lesser steps such as caring for the needy, or praying for others. During those times when we are doubting our faith we can turn to this section of the Book of Hebrews to see how those before us obeyed God and were commended for doing so. We can expect that if we obey God we too will one day be commended by God in our own "Hall of Faith."

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The second reading from Luke concerns the subject of readiness. Here we will see how Jesus calls us disciples of Him to be ready for His imminent return by accomplishing the works which He has given us.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 12:32-48 NAS95 32 Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35 Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. 36 Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. 38 Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 39 But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 40 You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect." 41 Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" 42 And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 44 Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 45 But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; 46 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. 47 And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, 48 but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.

Jesus called His disciples to fulfil the greater kingdom purposes for their lives by seeking first the kingdom of God as reflected in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33). He told the disciples that the place on which they focus their investment reveals the true condition of their hearts (v. 34). Next, He provides them with a parable concerning a master who left his servants in charge while he was away (vv. 36 – 40). In the case of this parable, the Lord Jesus uniquely provides the interpretation of it before and after the giving of the parable itself. His disciples are to be ready for the imminent return of their master even though they do not know when he will return. By application this means that as believers, we are to be accomplishing the works of our Father God even though we do not know when Jesus will return.

The second section of the reading proceeds along the same line of reasoning but using an example with a contrast between a godly servant waiting for the return of his master (vv. 42 – 43) contrasted with that of an ungodly one who beat his slaves and got drunk while waiting (vv. 45 – 48). The application of these verses is that nonbelievers who commit great sins will be punished less than nonbelievers who commit great ones. For all believers are totally forgiven of their sins through the finished work of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:14). However, the application of the reading as a whole doesn't just apply to nonbelievers as we see in the concluding verse. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (v. 48d-ff). The big idea is that God calls all people to exercise godly stewardship of the gifts that He has given them. As people in the unique small set of believers (Matthew 7:13), we are to live with patient expectation that God could return at any instant while going about accomplishing the things that God has asked us to do. First and foremost, this means accomplish the Great Commission, making disciples and teaching them all things (Matthew 28: 16-20).

This week please join me in praying for a young man from my hometown who was recently (July 2016) diagnosed with a brain tumor and just underwent surgery. Please pray for his healing and that through this time he may reach out to God and find faith in Him.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways would memorizing the author of Hebrew's definition of faith in God help you to combat future weaknesses in your own faith? "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." How does reading the Hall of Faith help you through these same weaknesses?

2. How does understanding the gifts which God has given you help you to exercise better stewardship of the things in your life?

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/080716.cfm

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 117

Source(s):

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

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_08-07-2016.pdfDownload

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-31-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-31-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon, king of Israel, and the wisest man of his time. Although it is inspired by God—as is all Scripture–it is written from the perspective of a frustrated man who is seeking for answers to life's hard questions. The second reading is from Paul's epistle to the early church in Colossae. Its theme is the Christian life that is centered in Jesus Christ and how that is lived out in everyday life. Finally, we look once again at the Gospel of Luke and hear Jesus speak about the dangers of human greed.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Ecclesiastes is a hard book for many readers to understand, because at times it seems to support

ideas that are contrary to other biblical teachings. For example, "There is a time to kill" (3:3). Of course, context is all important in interpreting Scripture, so we have to remember that the author, though the wisest of all men, is looking at life from a purely secular perspective. He uses the expression, "under the sun" more than two dozen times in the book.

First Reading:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 NAS95 1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Ecclesiastes 2:21-23 NAS95 21 When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? 23 Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

The authorship of this book is made perfectly clear from the very beginning. He is the third king of Israel, under whose reign the nation reaches the pinnacle of its world prominence, especially in terms of wealth. God had spoken to Solomon on at least two occasions and had asked him what he wanted above all else. Solomon asked not for riches or fame, but for wisdom, and God granted his request (1 Kings 3:5-12). And it was Solomon who built the temple for God to dwell in by His Shekinah Glory.

To read the exploits of Solomon is to discover a man of great talent, having written three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:32). He failed to keep his promises to God, however, and he took numerous foreign wives and accumulated thousands of horses in direct disobedience to God's commands. As a result, Solomon questions life's realities. What is life all about? What is its purpose? What good is it for man to work hard when he gains little and cannot rest?

Today's reading records those questions and the completely unsatisfactory answers in Solomon's judgment. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity," he writes. Another translation of this conclusion is "Completely meaningless! Everything is meaningless." We must remember, however, that this is not the end of all things. Solomon concludes this writing by acknowledging that his search "under the sun" has produced nothing, but there is a lesson to be learned. He writes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind (12:13). Today, then, in spite of the apparent hopelessness of life sometimes, we are to keep God's commandments. That will give us the peace that Solomon was searching for.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Whenever a paragraph begins with the word "therefore," you have to ask what has preceded and

how is it related to what is to follow. As a consequence to what Paul has taught in chapters 1 and 2, the believer should follow the instructions he is about to give. In other words, because the Christian recognizes that Jesus is God in the flesh (2:9), has "received Jesus as Lord" (2:6), and has been "made alive with Christ (2:13), he or she does not need to submit to the rules of the world that is controlled by Satan and his evil system (2:20).

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 6 – 8 which were omitted from the reading are included below.

Colossians 3:1-11 NAS95 1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, 10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him– 11 a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Instead of following the worldly way, the believer is to have a different motivation. The Christian has been raised up with Christ and is to "keep seeking the things above" (3:1). That is, his incentives should be spiritual, inspired from above, not worldly. Believers are to focus on "things above not on the things … on the earth (v. 2). The apostle uses the phrase, "set your mind," which reminds us of what he wrote in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters . . . Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (verses 1-2). It's a matter of the mind—what we think. Instructions like this have less to do with emotion and more to do with sound thinking and proper conduct as a result.

How is all this possible? Paul makes it clear; the believer "has died" (to sin), his life is "hidden with Christ in God," and one day Christians will be "revealed with Him in glory." It all begins with acknowledging these facts as true, considering our bodies as being dead to the evils that the writer lists (v. 5). Paul recognizes, as the Christian will, also, that we once walked in such sinful behavior, but now we are to put off all those sinful traits.

Since the Christian is part of the body of Christ, the church, he must put off sinful behavior and put on the new characteristics of the believer who is born again of God and has a new nature. Paul concludes this portion of the reading by reminding us that when men and women come into a relationship with Jesus Christ by faith, they join a host of believers whose prior differences are of no

significance now. The family of God is distinct in itself but it no longer involves ethnic origins, religious distinctions, social positions, or any such differences. We are all in Christ and He is the center of all things and the head of the body.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Jesus was speaking to a large crowd, "many thousands," the text says (Luke 12:1). He speaks first to His disciples, warning them about dangers to come. Even though there will be some who will try to kill them, they are not to fear, because they belong to God. He encourages them to realize that God cares for every sparrow, and they are much more precious to Him than the birds. As Jesus was telling them about what would occur, He is interrupted by a request from the crowd. It's a personal concern that Jesus addresses and uses to teach important principles about possessions and greed.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 12:13-21 NAS95 13 Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." 16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. 17 And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' 21 So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

The request: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Without responding to the specific request, Jesus uses it as a springboard to reveal real-life principles that are not widely recognized or practiced (either in His day or today). Good teachers, by the way, will wisely take such opportunities to launch a lesson that has much broader application than the personal request or question of an individual inquirer.

Jesus begins by saying, "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." Then, as He often did, Jesus tells a parable, a story, to illustrate His point. He tells about a rich man who could think only of how to accumulate more riches and how to hoard them. He thought that he would then be able to enjoy a life of ease and plenty. The rich man's plight sounds a lot like many of our 21st century citizens in more affluent countries. To look at the size of people's houses and their overflowing garages, one might think that Jesus was wrong. "Stuff" does seem to be of great importance. Yet, as the Broadway play says, "You Can't Take It With You." So, we should consider our spiritual condition more than the abundance of things we own.

Jesus went on to share the climax of the story. God intervenes in the rich man's life and enlightens him—and us—of the insignificance of life if it is all wrapped up in what we have. There are two dire consequences of the rich man's plan. First, he has not thought of the future in eternal terms. His soul is lost forever. Second, he has not thought of his possessions in terms of their true value. What happens to them when he's gone? Perhaps we should also recognize that he gave no consideration to how those possessions could be used for wider benefit than his own personal enjoyment.

Jesus concludes, applying the lesson to all his hearers (and readers of the text today): "The man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" is doomed as was the rich fool. So, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What are one or two ways in which you are storing up for yourself treasure on earth? In what ways does Jesus' teaching inform you heart as a defense against this?

2. Since you have placed your trust in Jesus for salvation, are you setting your mind on heavenly things, avoiding the lure of the world, and renewing your mind in God's Word? In light of what you learned today, what are some of the things that God has empowered you to do differently next week?

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/073116.cfm

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 114

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_07-31-2016.pdfDownload

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-24-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-24-2016**. This week we cover three excellent readings in which we learn more about God's righteous nature, the forgiveness that we have through Jesus Christ, and how Jesus teaches us to pray.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading from Genesis picks up where we left off in last week's reading where we saw Abraham meet with two angels and the Lord Jesus Himself. This week's reading deals with Abraham's pleading with God concerning the people of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities were located just north of the Dead Sea in an area known for its great fertility. Today's reading chronicles the events leading up to the destruction of the cities turning them into the wasteland that they are today.

First Reading:

Genesis 18:20-32 NAS95 20 And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. 21 I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely

according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." 22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. 23 Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" 26 So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." 27 And Abraham replied, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29 He spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose forty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty." 30 Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." 31 And he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty." 32 Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten."

The LORD told Abraham about the terrible sin of the people of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 20). The text says that the LORD would go "down" to Sodom (v. 20), a word which brings with it two meanings, geographically south and downwards spiritually. Looking back to chapter 13, we see how Abraham's nephew Lot chose to live in this fertile region when the land would not support both of their herds and there was a conflict among their herdsmen (Genesis 13:7). Abraham, a man who was well acquainted with God and knew of His grace and forgiveness, pleaded with the Lord Jesus before He went down to the region to judge them. We are not told how Abraham knew that the LORD's visit meant judgment. Regardless, Abraham began pleading on the basis of whether there were fifty righteous people in the cities would the LORD not destroy the people? Jesus' answer was implied as negative, there were not fifty righteous people in the region. After Abraham received this negative implication, he proceeded to boldly decrease the number, first to 40, then 30, 20, 10, and finally just 5. By implication by not responding to Abraham's final question the region of Sodom and Gomorrah did not contain even five righteous people. What a terrible condition the region had come to without having even five righteous people in the region!

We may ask, how many righteous people were there in these cities? We know that there was at least one righteous person in the land, the person of Lot, or at least he came to be righteous in his later life after the destruction of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah in which he lived. Even if Lot was righteous in the eyes of the Lord, this would not have brought the total number to the value of five predicated by Abraham's question. We know that the LORD did not destroy Lot. Rather He sent the two angels with whom Abraham had met and they eventually led him away from the city before the fire rained down (Genesis 19:24-25). Looking a bit deeper at Lot, although he may or may not have a righteous man at the time of the story in Genesis 18, we do know that sometime later he repented

and was added to the hall of faith in the New Testament. We also know that God spared the city of Zoar from destruction because of Lot's request (Genesis 19:20-21).

The rest of Lot's family didn't fare so well. We know that Lot's wife didn't make the grade (Genesis 19:26). The relationship between Lot's daughters and God is murky since we know that they later engaged in immoral sexual relations with their father since they felt that after the destruction of Sodom every man was dead and that they had to save the race from extinction (Genesis 19:19:31). This severe faithlessness may be abrogated a bit in light of the fact that they had just witnessed the terrible extermination of everyone in the region in which they lived by fire and brimstone raining from the sky (Genesis 19:24). This brings to mine the story of Elijah when he thought that he was the last believer alive in the entire world (1 Kings 19:14). Then the LORD reminded this great prophet during his brief season of faithlessness that there remained 7,000 who had or would be true to Him (1 Kings 19:18). So although Lot's daughters may have doubted God's promises made through Abraham we are not told the ultimate condition of their heart.

Abraham brought out the central point of the reading in his question at end of verse 25, "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" The answer, one that is woven throughout the narrative of the decreasing numbers, is a resounding yes. Yes, the Judge of all the earth shall do justly, including the destruction of the wicked. Although in our day God mostly withholds judgment of the "wicked" until after they die, the Bible is clear that judgement is a certainty for those that deny the Lord Jesus and don't yield to His Holy Spirit in giving up their sinful lives.

It is useful to read what Saint Peter wrote about today's story and Lot:

*2 Peter 2:6-9 NAS95 6 (emphasis added) and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; 7 and if He rescued **righteous Lot**, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment,*

Peter's explanation helps us to understand the implications of living a **lifelong** pattern of sin without repenting through God's empowerment found through faith in Jesus Christ. Peter was clear that we are to learn from other's mistakes, and Sodom and Gomorrah stands as a "doozie" of an example useful to all of us today. Paul said, "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" (1Corinthians 10:11). This leads us to the main point of the reading. If Lot can find forgiveness and faith in God in spite of the series of poor choices he made, we took can do the same. God stands ready to forgive us of our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9b-ff). Through the empowerment of the

Holy Spirit, we are motivated to confess our sins (1 John 1:9a) and receive God's blessing upon our lives demonstrated by our service to Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from Colossians continues from last week (Colossians 1:24-28) but skips forward to verse 12 of the second chapter. The context of the omitted verses 1 -11 in the second chapter leading up to today's reading is Paul's affirmation of Jesus' humanity and divinity, something which the Gnostics opposed. This was because the false teachers that had infiltrated the church taught that since only spirit was good in contrast to flesh that was evil, the person of the Lord Jesus could not have truly manifested Himself as divinity in the flesh. Paul said, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). He also taught the Colossian church how they were complete in Christ Jesus and spiritually circumcised in their heart without the necessity of the physical operation itself (vv. 10-11). The reading continues with important teaching on a Christian's identity in Christ.

Second Reading:

Colossians 2:12-14 NAS95 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Paul taught that as believers our spiritually dead carnal life is buried in baptism as a picture of being born from the Spirit of God. When a person is immersed in baptism they make a statement that their sins are buried with Jesus Christ's burial, but when they emerge from the water they are raised in the newness of life in a similar was as when Jesus rose from the dead. Although Jesus was dead, God raised Him from the dead (v. 12d). Through faith God in a sense raised believers from the dead (v. 12c). In addition, as believers God forgave all of our sins – past, present and future (v. 13) and nailed the record of our transgressions to the cross of Christ (v. 14). This hostile "certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us" (v. 14a) has been forever taken away from us!

What does it mean to have all of our sins taken away, forever, with even the record of them being destroyed? One aspect is that if Satan (or we do in our ourselves) brings our past sins back into our mind, we can call upon God in prayer to fight this spiritual battle raging against us with a one hundred percent certain outcome. This is because as believers our God has forgiven us through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. It is only when we doubt our standing as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ that these attacks can harm our minds. Another aspect is that we can trust that although people may bring up our past sins God will never do it. God through Jesus Christ has placed our sins as far as east is from west (Psalm 103:12).

Next, as we turn to the Gospel reading, we will learn something from the Lord Jesus about how He instructed His disciples to pray specifically concerning their needs. This study will be useful because we know that prayer is the antidote to worry that comes when our enemies (spiritual and physical) bring up our past sins.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke is the Lord Jesus' teaching on prayer that He gave in response to one of His disciple's questions, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." As you read, begin to develop a list of bullet points from Jesus' teaching. Ask, what is Jesus teaching **me** about prayer?

Gospel Reading:

Luke 11:1-13 NAS95 1 It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." 2 And He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation." 5 Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6 for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. 9 So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. 11 Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? 12 Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? 13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

What can we learn about prayer from the Lord Jesus? The big idea of Jesus' teaching on prayer was to pray to the Person of the Father, pray specifically and pray persistently. Prayer is an antidote to worry, as when Satan brings to mind our past sins as we just mentioned in the second reading. In order for this to be an antidote to worry, we must enter into the reality of this prayer, not just recite it. Here are some other points that we can learn about prayer from today's reading.

- We have a Father (that implies a relationship with someone bigger, wiser and more able to cope with this world than ourselves; we are not orphans).
- Our Father is in heaven (He is above the fray of this world and has power and resources at his command that we cannot even fathom).

- His name is holy (His name refers to his character and essence. If he is holy, then he relates in a way that is set apart from the world's way. His holiness is what creates a foundation of trust for us to surrender our will to His will, to turn to Him in our time of need.
- He has a kingdom that is on the move. We can choose to be part of His kingdom and allow His way of heaven to infiltrate this world through my life. Instead of worrying about how I'm going to make it in this world, I am now focused on being used by God to bring His ways to bear on this world.
- He forgives us, and through His strength we can extend forgiveness to others. This is a quality of the Kingdom of God that is countercultural to the world's ways.
- He leads us out of temptation and delivers us from evil. Do I really want to be delivered from temptation and evil, or do I want only to be delivered from the negative consequences of sin?
- He has a kingdom, power and glory that will be manifested forever. Do I want to be a part of this, or do I think that doing life on my own is a better option?
- God calls us to be specific in our prayer. If we (or others) are sick Jesus is teaching us to pray that we may be well. This may be intuitive to you, but how often have you been sick and not prayed for your own healing? Perhaps Jesus will allow sickness in your own life such as to give you compassion for others who are sick.
- God calls us to be persistent in prayer. This is clear not only in today's teaching but also in Jesus' teaching on the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8). In that case Jesus applauded the efforts of a woman who continually nagged a judge to resolve her case. Jesus calls us to be persistent.

These are some amazing realities that Jesus understood and allowed Him to live in a countercultural way, free of worry and anxiety, because He knew who His Father was. He offers that same type of perspective to us, if we will ask Him to teach us to pray in this way.

As believers, we can be confident that God not only hears our prayers, but answers them. John said, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 John 5:14-15). The key is praying according to God's will. We do that by learning His will, and the way to do that is to study His revealed will in the Bible, the Word of God. God's answers to our prayers may **not** be as we expect. He may answer yes, not, wait, or lead us in another direction to pray. God calls us to pray boldly as we see in Hebrews: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

We hope that what you have learned today will help you to pray more effectively and fervently by having the confidence that God will hear and answer you. Over the years I have prayed for a very long list (about 150) people each day concerning their salvation. Over the course of the last almost two decades I have seen God answer my prayers in miraculous ways. In one case a man who had experienced God's miraculous intervention in an accident came to know the Lord Jesus much later in his life as a result of a second drunk driving arrest. This was a man that I had been praying for over

the course of about 15 years. He later told me that he had felt called to God during that entire time and this was the natural outcome of what had to happen. He was thankful for God bringing him to this point of decision by using the bad events in his life to turn him around onto the track of following Him. Perhaps one of my faithful readers will recognize the person about whom I am speaking. May God be glorified in all that we do and may we praise Him for His intervention.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Today we learned something from Jesus about how to pray. In what ways does Jesus' teaching challenge your current prayer life?

2. Look back at your some urgent prayers you made to God in the past year. Were any of these written in a journal? How were these prayers answered? How helpful would it be for you to write down certain prayer requests in a journal in order to be able to remember and to look back and update them with notes about how God responded? Consider starting a prayer journal and using note cards to write down your urgent prayer requests that you carry with you each day.

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/072416.cfm

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 111

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-17-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-17-2016**. This week we study a reading from Genesis where Abraham meets the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Who provides him with an important confirmation of a promised blessing. We also look at a reading in Colossians and close with the story about Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Genesis is the appearance of the Lord to Abraham when he was ninety-nine years old just after he had obeyed God's order to be circumcised (Genesis 17:24) along with his son Ishmael (v. 13) born through his handmaid. Just prior to this, God had reconfirmed His promise of a son through Sarah by saying, "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year" (Genesis 17:21).

First Reading:

Genesis 18:1-10 NAS95 1 Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. 2 When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, 3 and said, "My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. 4 Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest

yourselves under the tree; 5 and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant." And they said, "So do, as you have said." 6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes." 7 Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. 8 He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. 9 Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 He said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him.

Note how the reading opens with "Now the LORD appeared" (v. 1) and then says in the next verse, "three men were standing opposite him" (v. 2b). In order to understand what is happening in these verses we must look beyond the verses covered in the reading. Later in this chapter we see that "the men" (plural) departed and Abraham was left standing with the LORD (Genesis 18:22) at which point Abraham did his famous reasoning with God about whether there were any righteous men in Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32). Next the text says, "As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place" (Genesis 18:33). If the men departed but Abraham was left standing with the LORD what was happening was that Abraham was standing face to face with the preincarnate Jesus Christ. God appeared in the form of a man to Abraham through, what theologians call, a "Christophany." As Abraham rushed around to prepare a meal for the group of two men (who were angels as stated in Genesis 19:1) and the Lord Jesus, the Lord provided yet another confirmation of His promise to him as they ate together. Sarah also heard the promise as she listened from the tent door while the "men" ate outside (v. 10). The Lord told him, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son" (v. 10).

For Abraham and all of those who walk by faith, this is an important passage that tells of God's story for redemption. Abraham is called the father of faith, because it was through him that the Messiah would come. He looked forward to redemption, while we look back in history at the cross, where the transaction took place. Jesus paid the price for our redemption and provides the way for us to be reconciled to the Father, resulting in eternal life. This re-confirmation of God's sending of a promised son delivered by none other than The Promised Son Himself provided an important foreshadowing of how God's promises may be trusted in the sending of the ultimate, final, only Son Jesus to the earth some two thousand years later.

God understands what we need in terms of confirmation of His promises during the times that we may be in doubt. In the same way that God understood Abraham's need for confirmation of His promise, we too may turn to God for the confirmation of the promises He has made to us. We do this first through understanding His promises, and then turning to the Scriptures to renew our understanding of the promises that we find there. In prayer, we affirm those promises and learn to stake our lives on what God has said. In our daily lives, we learn to walk by faith in God, trusting in His character and knowing that He will make good on His promises.

As we transition to the second reading, we will see the importance of understanding Jesus' true humanity in light of the false teachings happening in the early church. Although Jesus appeared to Abraham in the form of man as we saw in the first reading, the Bible states that Jesus was born in the flesh through Mary in order to live a perfect, sinless life and then gave Himself as the final offering of sins forever.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians. It is vital to understand the context in which Paul is writing to the church at Colosse. Today's reading is from the opening chapter of the Book that is concerned with correcting the heretical beliefs of some in the Colossian church including elements of Gnosticism. This belief system taught that matter is evil, God is good and in the case of the Colossians, that Jesus was just another emanation of God and not fully God Himself in the flesh. They also taught that a special secret high knowledge (gnosis) was required for true salvation and spiritual enlightenment.

Second Reading:

Colossians 1:24-28 NAS95 24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. 25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, 26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, 27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Paul affirmed how Christ's body is the church for which he rejoices in his suffering (v. 24). The core of his message to the Colossians was how God had revealed through the church the mystery "which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints" (v. 26) which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v. 26b-ff). It is through the reception and understanding of this mystery that believers are made complete in Christ.

A question that we must ask ourselves based on this text is whether Christ's sacrifice was sufficient or do we need to do something to add to it to make up what is lacking? What was Paul referring to when he said that his suffering filled up "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

The Scriptures are clear that God's work of redemption was finished on the cross when Jesus declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Hebrews 10:12 says, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (ESV), which further verifies that redemption was finished at the cross by Jesus' sacrifice. Paul himself affirms in various places and in various ways that Christ's work is sufficient to cover our sins. Cite numerous verses here.

God calls us to serve Him through our good works that flow out of a heart changed by God. This is clear from these verses in Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:8-10 NAS95 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

James in the Book by his name described the nature of saving faith as that which produces good works for God (James 2:17). Rather than thinking that by doing God's work we are earning our salvation, God calls us instead to seek His will for our lives and accept the blessing of Jesus' finished work for us. In this way we may be presented to God as "complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28) as we read in today's reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke picks up from last week's message regarding the Good Samaritan. This time instead of relating a *story* about a traveler on a road, Jesus and His disciples were themselves traveling on a road. We know from the context that the village that we will read about them entering is Bethany. This small city was located very close to Jerusalem.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 10:38-42 NAS95 38 Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. 40 But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." 41 But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; 42 but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

The reading is a story about priority and motive. It's about the energy with which we do something. Martha busied herself with the dinner preparation while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to Him. This contrasts with how we saw Abraham and Sarah work together to prepare the meal for the Lord and then listened to Him during the meal (except Sarah listened from a distance). Here Mary allows Martha to serve while sitting down and listening to Jesus. This bothered Martha who then spoke up to Jesus about the situation. Jesus gently corrected Martha's misunderstanding of Mary's motives, thinking that she was being lazy and neglecting in the serving of their important guest. Jesus told Martha that Mary did choose correctly to sit and listen at the feet of Jesus.

It's not a bad thing that Martha desired to serve Jesus, but there can be a service that is devoid of relationship. This is inferred by the way that Martha talks to Jesus about Mary. Her service was no longer about meeting the needs of Jesus but was about keeping score and trying to validate herself.

Mary on the other hand was willing to appear culturally inappropriate by sitting at the feet of Jesus with the rest of the men. She felt comfortable sitting at the feet of Jesus, which is normal place for the disciple in that cultural context. Mary seems to be the only that truly understood that Jesus had to die. We know that the Gospels record how Mary anointed Jesus that evening. It is very likely that Jesus could smell Mary's anointing while He was hanging on the cross which would serve as a small comfort and blessing.

The main point of the reading is not that Jesus is reprimanding Martha for serving Him, but that He is saying that our serving needs to be connected to relationship (sitting at Jesus' feet). Mary showed true devotion to Christ not just by serving Him a meal but by being present and listening to Him. She understood that Jesus' time on the earth was drawing to a close, something that Jesus' own disciples failed to understand (Luke 18:34).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Abraham is the father of faith and needed confirmation of God's reliability. What promises of God are you standing on and how is God reconfirming your faith to trust Him? How can others support you in your journey to walk by faith?

2. In the Gospel reading we saw how Mary sat and listened to Jesus while Martha busied herself with the preparation of the meal. In what ways was Martha jealous of Mary? Was Mary being lazy? Why or who not?

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/071716.cfm

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 108

Source(s):

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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