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

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-11-2015



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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

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

As we move toward verse 12, where today's reading begins, we see the author's summary statement about the heart of the matter, belief in God's written Word. "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard" (Hebrews 4:2). The writer goes on to explain that entrance into

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

are spiritual babies able only to partake of spiritual milk and not solid food (Hebrews 5:12). He cautions his readers in the closing verse to remember that they cannot fool God about all of this because "all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him" (v. 13b).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:
Mark 10:17-30 NAS95 17 As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments, 'DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'" 20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." 21 Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. 23 And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." 28 Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left

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

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

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

What does this mean for us today? We cannot overstate the importance of the application of Jesus' teaching in these few verses. First, we cannot earn eternal life by doing anything; that comes only through belief in Jesus Christ alone. Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners and cannot change that without the outside intervention of God, no matter how hard we try. The rich man in the story tried very hard, yet even he was unable to cleanse his heart through keeping the commandments. When measured against God's perfect

standard, he fell far short, and Jesus revealed to him that he had disobeyed the first and most important commandment, loving God above everything else. If we think we can be saved by our good works, or that our good works are meritorious towards salvation, Paul explains the relationship between faith and works. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10, emphasis added). Paul said, "He saved us, **not on the basis of deeds** which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5, emphasis added). Our good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ as the result of a heart that has been changed by God, or "born from above (or again)." Jesus told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3b). Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus until later in his life, but God saw to it that his story was recorded in the Bible so that we could identify with this "Nick at Night."

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

I introduced my former neighbor Harvey in the introduction to this week's lesson. After I moved away I kept in touch with Harvey and also developed a closer relationship with his wife who kept me up to date on the various emergencies that developed concerning my friend. One weekend I travelled back to my former town to visit some friends who just happened to live down the street from my former home and my friend Harvey. One night I had a strange sense that something was going on with Harvey and I planned to visit him the following morning. After I awoke the next morning, I received a call from his daughter who told me that Harvey had passed away early that morning. She explained that the local pastor was with Harvey, and that he had requested to be baptized before he died. Harvey evidently gave testimony regarding his faith in Jesus. Harvey proceeded with this bold testimony of faith by submitting to baptism and died a short time later. A few days later I had the opportunity to meet the pastor at the funeral luncheon. I explained to him how Harvey had been deeply moved by the frequent visits of his church's members during years as he suffered from declining health. As his eyes began to well up with tears, along with my own, I told him that his faithful service and that of his church were the reasons that Harvey trusted in the Lord Jesus. I told him that Harvey often spoke about their visits and how thankful I was that they had served him in this way.

As I reflect upon what Harvey meant to me, I remember that at some point God had prompted me to begin praying for Harvey. God gave me a sense that salvation was possible even for Harvey, no matter what my feelings told me about the matter. Just to check, I plugged his name into a Google

search and was greeted with his smiling face from his memorial page. That reminded me that Harvey is alive forever in heaven, and one day I will visit him again. I have asked God to make this man one of the first people that I meet when I get to heaven. The evidence of his changed life just before he died has been a life-changing event for me. His testimony provides me with hope that God can reach even those we think are too hard to reach.

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

Readings for the Week

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

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

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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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 03-15-2015. This week we examine the readings and discover many important truths about God. We learn about the nature of God and how He is faithful, just and forgiving. We see how we cannot earn our righteous standing before God and how this is a free gift to us through faith in His One and Only provision, Jesus Christ.

The first reading is from the Book of Second Chronicles. The context was a time of deep darkness in the Kingdom of Israel. Godly King Josiah, who was a key reformer for the Nation during the decline of the theocratic kingdom, had just been killed after going into battle against Neco King of Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:23). Following his death the decline of the kingdom continued with the appointment of Josiah's son Joahaz as King of Judah who was promptly deposed by Neco (2 Chronicles 36:3). At this point, "The king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But Neco took Joahaz his brother and brought him to Egypt" (2 Chronicles 36:4). This king "did evil in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 35:5) and after some 11 years was dragged captive to Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:5a, 6). In the short span of time before the happenings in today's reading two more kings ruled in Judah, first King Jehoiachin (v. 9) and finally Zedekiah who is introduced in the opening verse of the reading.

Note: We included all the intervening verses between 11 and 23 in order to include the full context and lead to the full meaning.

2 Chronicles 36:11-23 NAS95 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the

priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia–in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah–the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 23 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"

We see in the reading that Zedekiah continued the wickedness of his forefathers, and did not listen to the Lord who spoke through the contemporary Prophet Jeremiah (vv. 11-12). At that time, the Kingdom of Babylon was now the reigning world power and Jeramiah had spoken to Zedekiah about the coming siege by their mighty ruler King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him a message from the Lord saying, "I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jer 27:12). Zedekiah failed to heed God's advice given by Jeremiah and eventually "the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (v. 16a). The event that occurred next has reverberated throughout Jewish history ever since and included the destruction, looting, and burning of the temple, the destruction of the walls around Jerusalem, and the deportation of the people (including Jeremiah). God wasn't finished with Israel though, and He kept His promise to restore the temple and the city after seventy years. God said through Jeremiah, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). In the closing verses of the reading we see how the Medo Persian king Cyrus made a decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem along with the restoration of the people (vv. 22 – 23). Interestingly, the Prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Cyrus over a hundred years before he was even born, and stated that he would be God's shepherd to rebuild the temple, which hadn't even been destroyed yet. Isaiah said, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isa 44:28).

What can we learn about God from the reading? First, God works through any world leader, even idolatrous, pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus of Persia. We saw in the reading how God used Nebuchadnezzar to discipline His people during a seventy-year period under He raised up Cyrus to restore it. God called Cyrus His shepherd (Isa 44:28). Saint Paul told in the New Testament about how all rulers were established by God. He said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1).

A second thing we can learn about God from the reading is that He keeps his promises. Even when His patience is tested, His punishment also includes a plan for restoration even before the day of Judgment comes. As we saw in the introduction to the reading, King Zedekiah was the last in a long line of evil rulers that God allowed to serve in the Kingdom of Judah. Once the rules and the people continued in their unrepentant sin, God carried out His promised plan to discipline the people for 70 years. Then, he restored them according to His promise. In the same way, God is also faithful to us in that He only disciplines us because He loves us. The author of Hebrews said in quoting from Psalm 94:12, "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" Hebrews 12:6). He goes on to explain the meaning of the Lord's discipline. "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. 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" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Finally, we can draw more attributes of God from the reading, here are a few:

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).
- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out!
- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

As we move onto the second reading, we will learn more about another important aspect of God: He is a forgiving God, One who has provided the ultimate forgiveness for the sins of all humankind through the giving of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, take careful note of how clearly God has provided us with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and how works flow from a believer's heart that has been changed by God.

Ephesians 2:4-10 NAS95 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly

places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 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.

Saint Paul provided what is quite likely the clearest explanation of Christian salvation in the entire Bible. He said that a believer was "dead in their transgressions" (Romans 3:23) but then was "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). He states twice that a believer is saved by grace, not works (verses 5 and 8), not because of our works but because of God's great love for us (v. 4) and the grace of God (v. 8a) through our faith (v. 8). Finally, Paul says that the end result of our creation ("His workmanship") is the good works that God has prepared for us through His foreknowledge (v. 10). Salvation is a free gift from God (v. 8) that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23).

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3 and includes verse 16, which is the famous one that is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin (that is the Jewish ruling council). Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews so he met secretly with Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

John 3:14-21 NAS95 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 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. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

The story including in verse 14 was recorded in Numbers 21 during which Moses instructed the Hebrew people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sin and given eternal life as a gift of God. This is the same thing that we saw in the second reading (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases the people were (or are being) saved by

God's grace through faith in God.

We see in this passage that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connation of being unique. So to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. However, if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save.

We have covered a very lot of important ground this week. As we prepare for Easter Sunday on which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, let's contemplate how great is the mystery of salvation. How are you feeling, do you feel guilty because you sense that you haven't done enough for God? If you have repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness you can rest in God's graceful provision for you. Spend some time in prayer right now to talk to God and tell Him about your feelings. We pray that you have benefited from the readings this week.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We saw in the second reading how Paul explained the source and outcome of salvation for a believer in Jesus Christ. Explain the relationship between faith and works for the believer based upon Ephesians 2:4-10.

2. A common theme that exists in the lives of many who do not believe in Jesus as their only source of forgiveness of sin before God is the extent to which they do good works in their lives to justify the bad things they may have done. Read both the second and the Gospel reading again, and then the following verses:

Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Ac 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1John 5:12 – 13 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

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In light of these readings, explain the relationship between works and faith for the non-believing person. Will good their good works ever provide a means for a person to earn their way to heaven?

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/030815.cfm

First Reading 2 CHR 36:14-16, 19-23

Second Reading EPH 2:4-10

Gospel Reading JN 3:14-21

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 7-13-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 7-13-2014. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah in which we will see a calling to respond to the Lord message before it's too late. Then we will move onto the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans and then close with an important Gospel lesson called the parable of the soils.

The first reading is from Isaiah 55. The chapter opens with an invitation for everyone, even Gentiles (Isaiah 55:5) to partake of the benefits earned by the Suffering Servant in chapter 53 whom we know was the Lord Jesus. Isaiah said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost" (v. 1). Isaiah then went on to say some of the most often quoted verses from the Old Testament. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Isaiah explained God's invitation to salvation to everyone as well as an important insight into the nature of God.

> *6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)*

The Prophet emphasized the need for a person in the Old Testament to see the Lord before it was too late (v. 6), repent of their sin (v. 7a), trust in God's ability to forgive sin (v. 7), and recognize their insufficiency and sovereignty of the Lord (vv. 8-9). Now let us move onto the reading that begins at verse 10.

> *10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

Isaiah said that in the same way that the seasons are regular and reliable (v. 10) so it is that God's Word is regular and reliable (v. 11). The rain and snow water the seeds and make them fruitful. Therefore, God's Word operates in the hearts of His people through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-13) in order to make them fruitful. Later in the Gospel lesson, the importance of this principle will become evident in Jesus' parable of the soils.

Before we move onto the Gospel lesson and continue to learn the importance of listening to the Word of God and the operating upon what is says, we will move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this section, Paul emphasized the fallen condition of God's creation in which both the creation itself and humanity are crying out for reversal of the curse brought on as

a result of Adam's sin.

> *18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:18-23)*

Paul said that the "creation is groaning and [suffering]" (v.22) in labor pains along with our groaning while awaiting redemption (v. 23). The reward for our faithfulness in bearing fruit in our response to the Gospel message won't be evident until our bodies are redeemed when we die and go to be with the Lord (v. 23). Until then our spirits groan (v. 23) and so does the fallen creation (v. 22).

Have you ever noticed how the sound of wind whistling through the trees is a way in which the creation groans as it awaits redemption? I remember one particular evening when I was deer hunting in the woods on my parents farm back when I was a teenager. As the sun was getting ready to set I crept along through the pine forest being careful to move upwind in order to surprise any deer that may be wandering about in the woods that windy evening. As I continued to move through the woods, I stopped for a long time and just listened to the eerie sound of the wind moving through the trees. Although I had heard the wind moving through the trees before for some reason that evening it took on a special significance. The sounds in the trees worked in an opposite way of a chord, they clashed in such a way as to leave a lasting impression upon me that evening. I was glad I was carrying a gun. "The whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (v.22).

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, pause for a moment and imagine what it would have been like to sit at the feet of Jesus and not only hear his teaching but also have it privately explained to you. That is what happened in the Gospel lesson from Matthew 13 in Jesus' famous parable of the soils. The context is just after the Pharisees scolded Jesus' because his disciples had picked and eaten from standing grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2). Jesus used this occasion to proclaim his Lordship, saying, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (v. 8). He then went on to offend the Pharisees even more by healing a man with a withered hand, an action that caused them to "[conspire] against Him, as to how they might destroy Him" (v. 14).

The parable of the soils in the reading today from Saint Matthew is also found in a parallel account in chapter 8 of Luke. This parable is unique from many of the others because in both accounts Jesus went on to explain the meaning to his disciples privately away from the crowds.

> *1 That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2 And large crowds*

> *gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. 3 And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear." 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; 15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.' 16 But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. 18 Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20 The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:1-23)*

This parable focused upon the Gospel and the impact of it upon people's lives. Jesus explained the parable to His disciples and then told them how they were blessed because their eyes were open and their ears have heard (vv. 14, 16). They were blessed because they had heard things for which the prophets waited. Saint Peter said about them that they were, "seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1Peter 1:11).

Some people may ask one of two questions. First, why did Jesus guard the truth by speaking in parables? Jesus answered this in verse 13, "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while

seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." Saint Peter shed additional light on this in his Epistle when he was teaching about the false teachers that he prophesied would come into the church and had been troubling the church:

> *For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire'" (2 Peter 2:21-22).*

Peter said that that it "would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them" (v. 21). Jesus taught in parables as a means of grace by reducing the amount of light given to those that would **not** respond to His Gospel message. On the Day of Judgment, everyone will be accountable to God for how they responded to and used the information that they had. Paul said, "So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). A half dozen other verses in the Bible say that we are judged according to our deeds, meaning the fruit which we bore with the knowledge we were granted. [For further information see the following: Job 34:11; Ps 62:12; Pr 24:12; Jer 17:10; Jer 32:19; Mt 16:27; 1Co 3:8; 2Co 5:10; Re 2:23; Rev 20:12; and Rev 22:12.] This is the meaning of the parable of the soils; we are accountable to what we have heard although only one of the soils produced any fruit. Three of them are what Jesus called the "broad road" (Matthew 7:13). Only the seed that fell on the good soil produced any fruit, and then the production was in different measures. Additionally note that fruit bearing is **evidence** of salvation, not the cause of it (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Second, some have asked the question, What about the heathen in far off places that have never heard the Gospel, how will they be judged? [Hint: See Romans 1:19.] In this case, we need to set back, reconsider the question, and ask a different one. The question we should ask is what about us, what have we heard and what fruit have we born in response to the testimony of God's Word in the Bible?

Saint John wrote about the differences between the unfruitful hearers and those whom responded to the Gospel by producing good works for the Lord Jesus:

> *9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. 10 The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. 11 And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:9-13)*

Even though we work alongside the other types of soil, as believers in Jesus Christ we can rest assured that God will accomplish the good works that He began within us (Philippians 1:6). Our

good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ. Though some will produce more than others (as we saw in the parable), each believer **will** produce something precious in the eyes of the Lord. As we saw in the first reading it's important to act upon the information that we have been provided before it's too late.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We read in the Gospel lesson the subject of fruit bearing of the four different types of soils. What would you understand "fruit" to represent? What are some worries or other distractions that make you unfruitful in your Christian life?

2. What are some fields in which you have the opportunity to sow seed?

3. Some have untaken the challenge of going about their lives as "soil testers" or "fruit inspectors." Based upon what you have learned today why is such a "ministry" ungodly?

Readings for the Week

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Second Reading Romans 8:18-23

Gospel Reading Matthew 13:1-23

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