

Groaning

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.

– John 11:33–

The older I get, the more familiar I become with groaning. The human body seems to lose significant step by decade. As I am closing out my fifth ten-year cycle of life, I can say that there are many ambulatory motions I make today that elicit a groan that never would have been required ten or twenty years ago. How comforting to know that the next few decades will only bring about many more of these inarticulate utterances to accompany the most common of movements!

But there is also another, more intense type of groaning, residing deeper down in the inward man, experienced by the whole creation (Rom. 8:22), yet uniquely perceived by the spiritual man or woman (Rom. 8:23). It is an ardent loathing, a troubling of spirit that recognizes and bemoans the bitter effects of sin and the curse. It is felt most keenly by those who risk heart and emotion in living and loving. It is momentarily present during times of significant strain or loss, or through prolonged afflictions. It is a pang of soul that recognizes that the agony of the moment is not something that was ever intended – something quite foreign to God’s original plan. This groaning emanates from our broken hearts when we see “good people” going through unspeakable tragedy, or when we stand at the grave of a dearly beloved friend or family member being laid to rest. It churns within us when wayward loved ones destroy themselves with addiction, rebellion, and selfishness. It disturbs our own peace when the doctor delivers us or someone in our immediate circle a grim diagnosis, and it relentlessly molests us when we begin to see the effects of malevolent disease.

But beyond all the rude intrusion of such groaning lies wonderful solace and irrefutable hope. Our Lord Himself, Who is the Resurrection and the Life, partook fully of this bitter component of human experience. He knows what it is to groan and to desire that mortality be swallowed up of life. In the days of His flesh, He wept and He even groaned! At Calvary He drained the dregs of the cup of human suffering, crying, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Because He was tempted in this way, yet without sin, He has secured a day when He shall finally and totally eradicate this awful curse, and forever remove this bleating of soul from His redeemed ones. Until then, lest we get too comfortable in this fallen and foreign land, He has sent His kindred Spirit into our hearts Who maketh intercession for us with groanings so intensely deep they cannot be uttered.

Let us not shun a deep spiritual life. Life lived properly will present its many difficulties, and its correlative heartbreaks. But just as in the days of the exodus of Israel from the land of Egypt, we can rest fully assured that our Lord hears our groaning, and is coming down soon to deliver us (Acts 7:34). -- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Wonderful Things

*Isaiah 25:1: O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee,
I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things;*

The Wonder of His Creation

When one considers the infinite multiplicity of miracles that must occur every millisecond to sustain this complex ecosystem, we can do no less than stand in awe. He that, out of nothing, spoke the universe into existence is worthy of all glory. Granted the creation, in its present state, is marred by the curse, and yet the promise that the Creator will repriminate heaven and earth at His return excites the imagination of all who anxiously await that day of renewal. One wonders what sensual delights await us in the recreated universe!

The Wonder of His Divinity

As finite beings, we are privileged to have access to some of the mysteries of the "high and lofty one who inhabits eternity". But our knowledge is fragmentary. With Job we must admit "Lo, these are parts of his ways: but how little a portion is heard of him?" No doubt, part of the endless contemplations of heaven will include gaining a clearer understanding of the triune Godhead. We shall join the seraphim and cherubim in their thrice holy anthem, exalting the great three-in-one.

The Wonder of Our Redeemer

He whose name is Wonderful deserves our interminable admiration. Like the Good Samaritan, the Son of God has come down to where we have bound up the wounds of our dissolute lives and mollified the scars with the oil of His Spirit. Oh! the wonderful thing that He has done for us.

"Tis done—the great transaction's done;
I am my Lord's, and He is mine;
He drew me and I followed on,
Rejoiced to own the call divine.
Happy day, happy day,
When Jesus washed my sins away!

Exalt and Praise His Name,

Pastor

Cutting In

Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you.

Galatians 5: 7,8

In Paul's epistle to the Galatians, he instructs and warns the believers concerning the confusion of law and grace. Paul highlights that the Old Testament law was a schoolmaster designed to bring an individual to Christ. The Law revealed man's transgression against God's perfection; and showed them the need for a savior. Galatians also teaches that a believer's sanctification process is not by their efforts to adhere to the law; but rather by walking in the Spirit of God. Today's verse indicates that the believers at Galatia started out well in their newfound faith, but eventually someone hindered them in their Christian walk. The word hinder in this text has the connotation of cutting in to impede progress; like when a track athlete has someone cut in front of him as he runs towards the finish line. The apostle teaches that his old life is crucified with Christ and that Christ now lived in him, and the new life he lived was by faith in the Son of God, who loved him, and gave himself for him. The problem of people misunderstanding law and grace continues to this day. Grace is not a license to sin, and keeping the law is not a way of securing salvation and sanctification. When one searches the scriptures and compares the verses about law and grace, the Spirit will guide them to both their proper purpose and application.

Just as false teachers plagued the church at Galatia, many today can cut in between us and our Savior Jesus. As 1 John 2:18 states: *...even now are there many antichrists*. However, the false teachings go beyond aberrant Christian doctrine. Paganism, mysticism, and secular humanism have greatly infiltrated today's churches. There is also the problem of orthodox teachers who are elevated to a status that God never intended. Easily available and far-reaching airwaves have made celebrities of modern gospel teachers. Some people will follow a teacher because of their charismatic persona instead of the content and accuracy of their teaching. We should be thankful for the gifted teachers the Lord provides for the edification of believers, but even the best teachers are not a substitute for developing our walk with God through an intimate relationship with Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit Himself. 1 Corinthians 3: 4,5 states *For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?* What a great reminder of Who is to be foremost in our focus!

Today, as every day, is another part of the race that is set before us. Pray that God will make us aware of anyone or anything that cuts in front of us to hinder our pressing to the finish line.

~ J. Ekis

Then and now

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

I Corinthians 15:58

While this chapter provides a most extended discussion of the reality, impact, aspects, nature, and power of Christ's resurrection, this conclusion of all those lofty concepts lands right back into our everyday lives with a practical outcome. The hope most immediately described before this is the comfort, yea encouragement, used most often at the final graveside benediction for a beloved, departed believer. Climbing to the height of Isaiah's pronouncement of victory over death, as it is swallowed up by the resurrection power of our Lord Jesus Christ that will clothe the mortal with immortality, the apostle returns to its outworking in our daily realm. It is this heavenly-mindedness that will result in earthly goodness, as it provides a powerful basis for steadfastness in a walk that is worthy of our Lord.

As the Corinthians were bombarded with many winds of doctrine that dared to drive them off-course, so we must also recognize and resist such assaults in our day. As for them, so for us, all the truth propounded through verse 57 is sufficient to establish steadfast and unmovable progress in His service. The "therefore" of our text shares a context that implies bold type! Then moving on, his exhortation also calls us not to a stagnant immovability, but also to constant abundance in His work – "*always abounding.*" We won't accomplish this through self-motivation. Jesus said *He* came to give us life, and that we might live more abundantly (John 10:10). This reflects the connection of the engine of our eternal hope with the drive shaft of our daily walk and work for Him. We realize in this that eternal life does not begin when we die, but when we believe. Then, as we thankfully live out the word through the power of His Spirit, we are reminded that each deed done in His name for His glory is not without effect (in vain), but will accomplish His purpose now in this time.

Imprisoned Ears

*And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.
– Acts 16:25 –*

The devil is a formidable foe of man, but we must also recognize that he is not omniscient. Quite the contrary. As intelligent a being as he is, he is prone to miscalculation. One such example is found in our text. He had stirred the pot in this city of Philippi and ensured a good degree of misery for a number of men to be imprisoned in that city's jail. What they had done, we are not told. No doubt there was a decent array of representation of innocent men falsely accused, petty thieves, and dastardly criminals. One thing they shared, though. They were all prisoners – prisoners in an awful Roman jail, secured in shackles, rats for cell mates, and a hole in the ground to relieve themselves. These putrid and squalid conditions were designed to strip them of their dignity and rob them of any hope. The devil loves to see sinners in such conditions, and it's a bonus for him if it's at the hands of other sinners. Doubtless, these halls were filled with weeping and moans, cursing and bitterness, all contributing to the velocity of the downward vortex of despair.

But the night Paul and Silas were jailed, something changed in that place. It was probably ignored at first. Like some kind of auditory illusion, it simply could not be. But as the minutes turned to hours, it became apparent that it was real. Prayers and praise coming from the cell of the new prisoners. Likely some laughter as well. Joy and gladness? Here? Really? It couldn't be, could it? How could anyone in this repugnant place be...singing? It was such an anomalous thing that when the earthquake came – when everyone's fetters fell off, and everyone's doors opened – these prisoners, instead of rushing back to the "freedom" of a world they once knew, went instead to inspect and inquire of these two hope-sharing fellow convicts. None of them left! (Acts 16:28) They realized that what was in Paul and Silas's cell offered them hope of a liberty they had never known the entirety of their lives.

While we may not readily see it, prisoners surround us daily. Men and women imprisoned by the world, the flesh, and the devil, wallowing in hopelessness and despair. We should know full well, for we once shared their chains. Some of the same fetters we still own. We are neither immune to tragedy nor isolated from affliction. In this world we have tribulation, just like them. But (most blessed contrasting conjunction) we can be of good cheer, for our Savior has overcome the world. A new song is in our hearts, even praise unto our God. By simply living unto Him – praying, and praising, and living, and loving, despite the tempest – it will doubtless happen that some imprisoned ears about us will take note, and we will find opportunity to share the reason for the hope that is in us.

Let us loudly pray and sing praise and witness of our Christ today. He loves to set the devil's prisoners free – ears and all! – *D. Murcek*

Pastor's Thoughts of the Week

Incomparable Love

In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. Isaiah 63:9

Love: the term is so cavalierly applied to relationships, circumstances and proclivities that it behooves us to qualify its usage. The greeks settled the matter by producing six distinctly different words to express what our one English word is used to describe. They are: eros: sexual passion, philia: deep friendship, ludus: playful love, pragma: longstanding love, philautia: love of the self, agape: self-sacrificial love. Humans are acquainted with each of these forms but constrained by syntactic limitation to gather them under a single heading.

Descending from the heights of glory came the son of God. And with Him came a love of incomparable value-agape love. Here is a love that stands above any other form as it seeks to please others and not ones self. Agape was later translated into Latin as caritas, which is the origin of our word "charity". The anointed translators of our authorized version wisely employed that word to give attribution to this highest form of love: Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Observe the superlative depth of what the apostle Paul defines as "the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge". Our text from Isaiah reminds us of the complete identification with His creation that the Lord experienced as he saved us, pitied us, endured our affliction, effected our redemption, and carried us through the tribulations of this life. All the other forms of what we clumsily gather together in a single word are so far deficient in expression as to demand a separate category of expression.

Valentine's Day is a holiday given to the expression of love and affords us an opportunity to experience love in all of its manifold nuances. They are wisest who have emulated the Savior in his incomparable love for mankind. As opportunities arise let us freely give to others, as was freely given to us.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

*Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God
Romans 10:17*

Ineffectual Religion

... they have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save.

Isaiah 45:20

Today's clever and deceptive advertising has caused many to fall prey to purchasing something that has no power to produce the desired effects. Whether it be some program to lose weight and sculpt a physique or some gadget that supposedly produces amazing results, one's effort, time, and money often become sacrifices of futility. In the forty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet is warning Jehovah's backslidden nation of the ineffectiveness of powerless idol worship. Isaiah reiterates multiple times that the LORD Jehovah is the one and only God. It is God who is the foundation on which man and the earth and the heavens above stand. Not only does the prophet emphasize the exclusiveness of Jehovah God, but he also reminds Israel that God is the only Savior. The twentieth verse reveals that idols are a product of ignorance and praying unto a god that cannot save is unproductive.

Idol worship has been a bane to mankind from the beginning. The growth of Christianity throughout history has liberated many from the blinding darkness of paganism. Many forms of idol worship still exist to this day and even have mutated into new forms of idolatry. The theory of evolution and humanism have drawn several generations away from orthodox Christianity. With both boldness and subtlety, these beliefs have caused many to doubt God and erase man's accountability for his actions. Self, instead of God, has become the pinnacle on which to focus. The growth of these deceptive beliefs might give a false impression of their validity; but there are important questions to be asked, such as: How powerful are the beliefs? Do they have the power to completely absolve the inner conscience from the guilt of sin? Do they have the power to transform the inner man? Do they give a person unshakable confidence of eternal life? Do these beliefs produce a sincere love for one's fellow man and a desire to focus beyond oneself? Do they present a loving sacrificial savior? Do they present a supreme being who hears and answers prayer? Yet, in desperation, it is natural for people to call out to something beyond themselves; but as today's text states - *they pray unto a god that cannot save.*

Today, fervently thank our God that as redeemed believers we have the true and Living God Who is able to relieve and deliver us from all the trials of life and also reserve a place in heaven for us. We are invited to come to Him continually and cast our burdens upon Him. His promises impact us in this life while also giving us a sure and enduring hope. Our faith in HIM far exceeds a nominal belief in some unknowable supreme being and offers us a personal relationship with the God of all creation. Our God cannot only save, but He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.

Hallelujah!

~ J. Ekis

Unbelief

And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went round about the villages, teaching.

Mark 6:5-6

These statements are among those that can leave us with more questions than answers as we read the scriptures. Yet among the questions there is always still some truth and lesson to glean. In this account of Jesus' visit to His "own country," presumably Nazareth, Mark's perspective seems to indicate that the unbelief of the people of the town was a limitation on the Lord's works. His perspective is also interesting in that Jesus' ability to lay his hands on the few sick folk and heal them was deemed "no mighty work." In our current era, to see the Lord heal a few sick folk would no doubt be counted as mighty works. Yet to the disciples who had witnessed the extremes of His impact throughout much of Galilee, this evidently paled in significance.

What is not provided here is a full explanation of the cause and effect. With the full power of the Holy Spirit working in Jesus, we would expect that no mere human attitude of unbelief could limit His power to heal. Yet Mark does not say, as Matthew did, simply that He did no mighty work there, but that He could do no mighty work there. We might infer that it was the Lord's choice to limit the works due to their unbelief, rather than there being some automatic spiritual principle at work in the causal relationship. Yet it is unique that He, who knew what was in man, marvelled because of their unbelief. We would not expect anything to shock Him. In the previous chapter, Jesus had told Jairus to "only believe" as He proceeded to heal his evidently deceased daughter. In many accounts Jesus expresses a link between people's faith and His works. But when there is no further explanation, we must leave some of these secrets alone.

But we should not leave the account there. There are lessons to be learned. One thing is clear – unbelief is a deterrent to experiencing God's mighty works, whatever they may be. Therefore, we do not need to understand all the inner workings of these phenomena. We simply need to apply the clear lesson, and desire that our own unbelief should not be a cause to miss the mighty works of God. Let us build ourselves up on our most holy faith, and know by the testimony of His word that He is able to accomplish all things according to His will. Then, as we leave the unknown in His keeping, let us with the disciples continue to pray, "Lord, increase our faith."

Fallow Ground

Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the LORD, till he come and rain righteousness upon you.

– Hosea 10:12 –

Genuine Christian faith is a matter of the heart. The spiritual heart is the epicenter of the inward man. The heart is malevolently afflicted with sin from birth, but it is also here where the miracle of the second birth occurs. It is here where the gospel is sown, takes root, and produces fruit. It is here where, when converted, God Himself takes up residence. It is here where a war rages between flesh and Spirit. All of our actions and reactions to just about everything in daily life are born directly from the heart. This is the continual ground zero for each of us for true faith, sanctified living, and eternal density.

Unfortunately, this spiritual organ is prone to neglect. Is it because it is unseen? Is it because it is deceitful? Whatever the case, there is no question to the believer who has lived for any length of days as a new creature that this inward sanctum, contrary to all we know to be true post regeneration, can nonetheless become cold and dull. It is a perilous yet true earth-side aspect of conversion that zealous devotion to our Savior and His kingdom is neither a standard nor a constant state. This central field within our souls can and often does become quite fallow – unseeded, untended, and unproductive. This is evidenced when a once-burning love for God becomes a lukewarm commitment to Him and the intensity of our desire for lost men and women is replaced by a cynical expectation that they can't or won't respond to the very gospel that saved us.

It is critical that we recognize this tendency, and that we are honest about such complacency. We must be sensitive to the condition of our hearts at all times. When we experience even the slightest alarm of listlessness therein or of stagnancy of spirit, it is time to break up the fallow ground. We must relentlessly seek Him till He comes and rains His torrents of love and grace and mercy and righteousness upon our dry and weary souls. These showers will be the blessed means He uses to revive us, and reinvigorate us for the work He has for us to do.

Dear reader, how is your heart? Is it a deeply penetrated soil, enjoying plenty of recent showers from heaven, thereby producing a life meet for the Master's use? Or is it all but fallow ground, in desperate need of a life-giving downpour? Tend your field. Rain will come. -- D. Murcek

The Great Exchange

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;

Isaiah 61:3

The sixty-first chapter of Isaiah speaks of the two advents of the Messiah. The characteristics of the first advent show the Messiah coming to preach good tidings while mending the brokenhearted and setting captives free from the bondage of sin. After centuries of oppression, His second coming will bring long-awaited relief from bondage and suffering to the nation of Israel. Beauty will replace ashes, mourning will be exchanged for joy, and the spirit of heaviness will be erased by a garment of praise. All of these oppressions are gladly exchanged for an infinitely superior replacement.

As believers today, we live in the era between the days when the Lord Jesus walked this earth and that future day when He comes to set up His kingdom. In this present time, through the power of the Word and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Lord continues to offer replacements for the pains of this life. Our spiritual birth occurred when we genuinely understood and accepted Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. He took our guilt of sin and freely offered forgiveness. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. During His time on earth, the Lord surrendered the riches of heaven to become poor for us, so that through His poverty we might be rich. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief so that we can experience the joy of salvation. The Lord's calming presence assuages our fears and replaces them with a peace that passes all understanding. When we walk in the light as He is in the light, our fellowship with Him has the power to chase away the darkness of our loneliness. When the problems of this life cause situations that break hearts, we are reminded of the Lord's promises that keep our focus heavenward. When we trust Him, the Lord also takes our lives filled with temporary and self-directed purpose and replaces them with a life guided by His spirit for our good and His glory.

Deals that are too good to be true are usually just that, but if we were ever truly presented with such a deal, we would be wise to take the offer. Most often there is some hidden attachment to the offer that profits the one who is proposing the deal. Fortunately, there is an eternally profitable offer that exists for all of mankind, that being God's unspeakable gift of salvation. Though it's a gift, it came at the great cost of the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. We can this day exchange all of our sins and burdens with Him to receive in return His abundant riches. ~J. Ekis

Worship His majesty

Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all.

I Chronicles 29:11

These fitting words were spoken by king David as he had finished offering unto the LORD all that he had prepared to give toward the temple that Solomon would build. He then had exhorted the congregation to follow his example, and was no doubt impressed with their heartfelt outpouring of offerings unto the same cause. Upon all this, David's understanding was established to respond, not with thanksgiving to the people for their generous spirit, nor with any pride in his own initiative or ability to bring such magnificent offerings, but in recognition of the greatness, power, glory, victory, and majesty of the LORD, from whom all these blessings flowed. He acknowledged that everything they had given had come to them from the LORD, so that in fact, "of thine own have we given thee" (v. 14). This reaction is far removed from that of the Pharisee who, centuries later, would stand in the temple and boast of giving "tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:12), while pretending to utter prayer to God.

Let David remind us that whatever we have, give, or accomplish, whatever occasions may come to us to share, bless, be blessed, or even to wait and trust, all comes from the LORD, who owns all. What a blessing He bestows upon His people to be able to know with Him the fulfillment and joy of using what is His for the benefit of His kingdom, including the benefit of others. No matter who gives or receives, He is exalted as head above all. What privilege He allows us to be able to honor Him with the gifts and provisions, material or immaterial, that spring from His bountiful care. In any and all such occasions, let us follow this example to worship His majesty!

Acceptance

And when these days are expired, it shall be, that upon the eighth day, and so forward, the priests shall make your burnt offerings upon the altar, and your peace offerings; and I will accept you, saith the LORD God.

– Ezekiel 43:27 –

It is likely that most if not all of us have heard an invitation to “accept Jesus.” Modern American Evangelicalism has tried to encapsulate the gospel in some way in this phrase. If the spirit of such an invitation means simply to receive God’s offer of salvation in Christ by trusting His finished work at Calvary and His resurrection, I suppose that is all well and good. But why do we not simply use God’s terminology instead of inventing our own? What’s troubling about this modern shibboleth is that it is nowhere in the Bible. Acceptance connotes approval, consent, and prerogative. In biblical terms, “accepting Christ”, if taken at face value, really turns the tables on the relationship between God and man. We might ask, in the transaction of salvation by grace through faith, who accepts whom? A rapid study of the word “accept” in our Bibles will make it quite clear what the Holy Ghost has written regarding acceptance...

In Gen. 4:7, God told Cain that He would accept him if he offered a bloody sacrifice. When implementing Jehovah’s sacerdotal worship, the Aaronic priest was prescribed to wear a gold plate upon the mitre inscribed with “Holiness to the Lord”, to “always be upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD” (Ex. 28:36-38). This same idea of God’s prerogative in acceptance of sacrifice is reiterated voluminously throughout the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Lev. 1:4; 7:18; 10:19; 19:7; 22:20-27; 23:11; Deut. 33:11). At the end of Job’s harrowing trial, God accepted him as well as his prayers for his three friends (Job 42:8-9). The psalms are filled with pleadings of worshipful hearts seeking God’s acceptance. One such famous example is found in Psalm 19:14, “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.” Throughout Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as well as the minor prophets, God makes clear that Israel’s ostentatious sacrifices are not acceptable to Him due to their idolatrous heart (e.g., Isa. 56:7; 58:5; Jer. 6:20; 14:10; Ezk. 20:40-41; 43:27; Amos 5:22; Mal. 1:8). When opening the door of salvation to the Gentiles in the book of Acts, Peter declares the revelation that “in every nation he that feareth [God] and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him” (Acts 10:35). Paul exhorts us to ensure that our witness is acceptable unto God (Rom. 12:1; 14:18; 2 Cor. 6:2), and basks in the glory of the gospel that His marvelous grace has made us, redeemed sinners, “acceptable in the beloved” (Eph. 1:6). And these are just some instances of what the Bible has to say about acceptance!

Let us be sure to keep our biblical lenses on. It is God Who does the accepting, not man. He has accepted us only because Christ made an acceptable sacrifice. It is simply ours to believe on the Lord Jesus, and to then marvel that He has not only received us into the ranks of the redeemed but has also adopted us as sons and daughters and made us joint heirs with Christ. How great a salvation, and how merciful our God! -- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Digging Deep

Proverbs 2:4-5: If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.

Precious jewels are not found on the earth's surface. One must dig, and dig deep, to unearth these valuable gems. Most gemstones form in the Earth's crust, approximately 3 to 25 miles beneath the Earth's surface. Two gemstones, diamonds and peridot, are found much deeper in the Earth. The deeper they are buried, the more valuable they are. The mining is an arduous task requiring much patience and time but the labor is well rewarded when the searcher excavates the priceless treasure.

Diamonds are typically recovered through pit mining, which involves the use of heavy machinery, hydraulic shovels, and trucks to extricate diamonds from their hiding places. In 2017, the 59-carat "Pink Star" diamond was sold for \$71 million, placing it as the most expensive gem ever purchased.

The Lord employs this metaphorical picture to illustrate the inestimable value that is found in seeking out the "hid treasures" in His word. These treasures are freely given, but not without strenuous labor. "If thou seekest" is God's mandate for acquiring the riches of His wisdom. Isaiah 45:3: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. And as is the case of pursuing earthly treasures, so in the spiritual realm, the deeper one digs the more valuable the reward. Psalms 92:5: O LORD, how great are thy works! and thy thoughts are very deep.

So let us take up the pickaxes and shovels and, as expectant prospectors, mine for the buried treasures within the sacred book. For now, we see a glass darkly and so it is our happy task to daily go to the minefields of God's word and unearth the embedded gemstones but the day is soon coming when "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD". In that holy domicile which He is now preparing, that sacred knowledge, now hidden, will be manifest and abundant without the need to labor to acquire it. We shall have instant access to the repository of wisdom and knowledge for even "the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones".

Happy Digging,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Two Probing Questions

And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith? ~ Mark 4:39,40

Questions often have a twofold purpose. They are posed to receive an answer, but questions can also cause the person questioned to ponder the depth and ramifications of what has been asked. Jesus often asked questions that brought individuals to a deep level of introspection. He asked the disciples “Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am? Jesus asked the infirmed man “wilt thou be made whole”? He questioned Peter with “wherefore didst thou doubt”? In Mark chapter eight, after He miraculously fed the four thousand, He posed this series of questions “Why reason ye because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? Have ye your heart yet hardened? having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember”? When many turned away from following Him, Jesus asked the disciples “Will ye also go away”. He asked a certain lawyer “what is written in the law? how readest thou”? After His resurrection our Lord asked Peter “lovest thou me more than these”? Jesus directed these questions and more to those He encountered in the Gospel accounts, and to us as well.

The questions in today’s text were asked after Jesus, by just speaking the word, stilled a severe wind and brought a great calm to the sea of Galilee. While crossing the sea, the disciples were caught in a terrible storm causing them to fear for their lives. After waking the Lord, they question Him whether He cared if they perished. His response to them should have caused them to reflect on what they had already seen Him do and what He had taught. The disciples had front-row seats to hear His sermon on the mount and also his parabolic lessons, and they had also been eyewitnesses of Jesus’ powerful healings. These experiences were enough to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

The circumstances that caused the disciples to fear and lose faith continue to plague believers today. It might not be a literal storm on a sea, but life’s trials can rage like powerful storms that trouble the soul. They can arise without warning and steal our focus away from the One who travels with us on the journey of life. God’s word reminds us that He who spoke the world into existence is the same, who speaks words of comfort to our troubled souls. God’s unseen hand holds us no matter what assails. In Mark 11, Jesus said “have faith in God”, and so we should; and when the storms of life confront us, may that faith remind us that the One who stilled the storm on Galilee is with us also. May He relieve our fears and increase our faith on this day. ~J. Ekis

Come down

Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.

Mark 15:31-32

This is one of three times in Mark's account where those watching Jesus on the cross speak of the possibility of His coming down from the cross. The first time is from "those that passed by," who railed on Him with their taunt of coming down (vv. 29-30). Our text is the second time, where the evil chief priests and scribes that condemned Him to this torture issue a similar dare. The third is somewhat different, and is uttered by one who had the authority to offer the Lord a sponge full of vinegar, after the misunderstanding from the crowd of His quotation of Psalm 22:1. This person evidently at this late stage of the suffering still held out the possibility that Jesus could come down, even if from a miraculous visitation from Elijah. Within the cruel mocking of the first two, and the skeptical anticipation of the third, who within the setting may have been a Roman responding to the crowd, there remains nonetheless an inherent admission of the possibility of such an event. His power was known. The chief priests confessed here that He saved others. Yet with all that knowledge they would not believe, which renders their statement here, "that we may see and believe," nothing more than rhetorical. However, those who knew Him, who stood bewildered and afar off, may have been still wondering if such were possible, until the end.

Yet none there at the moment understood the impossibility of His coming down. He was fulfilling that which He came to accomplish. The One with such power did have the power and right to come down, but not the intention. Instead, to satisfy the eternal purpose and plan of the Father, the Son endured the cross, despising the shame, for the joy that was set before Him to abolish death and to rise up in three days. While the scene before us in this account breaks our hearts to behold, our new testament hindsight recognizes His deep love in staying there to pay the price of our redemption. Such love, such wondrous love, provides us motivation to despise sin's temptation, and to proclaim with the apostle, "that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (II Corinthians 5:15).