

## What Did They See?

*And sitting down they watched him there;*

*Matthew 27:36*

When the Lord Jesus graced this world by walking in the form of a man, He was viewed in different ways by each person with whom He interacted. Many were riveted by His words of hope, while others thought He was mad. His miracles caused some to proclaim Him to be the Son of God; but others said His miracles were powered by the devil. Jesus' words and deeds were meant to penetrate the hearts and minds of men so that they might see the fulfillment of their deepest need in Him. Whether accepting, indifferent, or rejecting of Jesus' words and actions, all would be accountable for what they witnessed.

Crucifixions were a common mode of Roman capital punishment, so it was probably not the first assignment for the soldiers on that fateful day. After mocking Him, crowning Him with thorns, piercing His hands and feet with nails, and gambling over His garment, they sat down to watch Him slowly die. Though they had performed the vilest of deeds that day, God was providing for them the greatest opportunity in allowing them to observe the Son of God as He was completing His eternal plan. This event was *foreordained before the foundation of the world*, and would open heaven's gates for all who would believe. This day would change the course of history, and would be the topic of countless books and songs. Lives that had been destined for misery and bondage in this current life as well as in their eternal life to come, could now have the opportunity to be miraculously changed for God's glory. The apex of God' plan was unfolding before their eyes. Consistent with how He had lived his earthly life, Jesus displayed love and forgiveness as His holy blood drained from His body. His words, *sharper than a two-edged sword*, penetrated their souls, doing that invisible work designed to bring spiritual life. After watching Him draw His last breath and experiencing the resulting earthquake, the soldiers were convinced and declared that *Truly this was the Son of God*.

As believers, it is important for us to take time to sit at the foot of the cross, and gazing up and looking into the eyes of the lover of our soul, hear Him say *Father forgive them*. For these words we will be eternally grateful. ~J. Ekis

## Identification

*Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.*

*Romans 6:3-5*

There is great reason to celebrate the magnificent work of the Son of God in purchasing redemption for all who believe, through His unfathomable suffering and His glorious resurrection. Yet beyond celebration, when we have believed unto salvation, our text reminds us of the personal identification that becomes ours. The baptism described here has a two-fold application. It at once carries with it the symbolism of physical water baptism, but more significantly the counterpart of spiritual baptism. But the initiating baptism was His own, not only of symbolic water, but of His whole humanity into His passion. When we attempt to comprehend the immensity of His suffering, to pay our sin-debt and to satisfy righteousness, our humanity recognizes its limitations. Yet such an attempt of faith also stirs up a spirit of gratitude and love for such a Savior, that we can with the apostle express our desire to know the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death. Then we can be willing to welcome the rejection of the world, as He promised would be the case for His disciples. We can also share in a love for Him that can answer with the apostle, twice in this chapter, "God forbid!" when confronted with the false notion that grace might allow us to sin.

At the same time, the identification extends to the power of His resurrection, which we also long to know, not only in the grandeur of a promise for a blissful eternity in His presence, but also in our daily walk in newness of life, in the presence of His Spirit. Note that the apostle here makes the indivisible connection between the identification with both His death and life. As we own that newness of life with Him, the balance of this chapter reminds us of the power of His resurrection that enables us to live unto righteousness. Because He lives, we shall live also. And because death hath no more dominion over Him, so sin shall not have dominion over us; for He satisfied the righteousness of the law that would have condemned us, and empowers us to serve His righteousness. "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (Romans 6:22). Let us say with the hymnwriter, Such love, such wondrous love!

# Pastors Thoughts of the Week

## He Is Risen!

*And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Matthew 28:5-6*

The grim recollections of the violent scenes of Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha loomed in the hearts and minds of the disciples, What a dramatic reversal of emotions it must have been for those mourning disciples whose thoughts were suffused with the grisly recollections of the horrors of crucifixion. They were eye witnesses to the violent scene when with cruel hands their Lord was mercilessly flagellated, scornfully crowned with thorns, and brutally abused with the agonies of the cross. But to this dolorous picture we must add the final "G", namely the Garden-"John 19:41: *Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus*". It would be there that the holy women were greeted by the angelic salutation "He is Risen!". As Jesus predicted their "sorrow shall be turned into joy".

That most glad evangel fills the air again as we commence to celebrate God's greatest gift to mankind -The resurrection of Jesus Christ! All hail the Son of God who subdued the minions of darkness, both temporal and demonic, who thought they could "eat up His flesh" but instead stumbled and fell as Christ rose triumphantly to abolish death and bring immortality and life to light through this gospel. He is Risen! I am sure the unwelcome news echoed through the caverns of hell and signaled the defeat of all the miserable internees who even yet pine away in that dreadful inferno. It was equally unwelcome by those evil men that demanded His death when Pilate was willing to release Him. His blood would be upon them and their children by their own imprecation.

He is Risen! It was a glad anthem in the ears of the inhabitants of paradise that long awaited for the captain of their salvation to come and carry them captive into the presence of the God that they faithfully served without seeing. He is Risen! The rebel skeptic abhors the absolutism of this victory shout. Their fevered brains continue to denigrate the impeccable Savior as they oppose their own salvation inventing wicked machinations even denying the Lord that bought them. He is Risen! The deluded religionist hears this word but denies the power thereof and futilely labors on in a vain hope of pleasing God by meriting what God has declared can only be freely received.

He is Risen! Ah but to the true child of God, these are the words of a victory secured -a salvation from death, hell and the grave forever! All creation waited for these words and yet groans within, waiting for the final accomplishment as the "victor from the dark domain" returns in glory to subdue all of the curse beneath his nail-pierced feet. He is Risen! This bold assertion stands as a verbal Ebenezer reminding us that the work is finished and that the grand release lay before us. We must press towards the mark with renewed vigor and revived hearts until that day that our risen King calls us into His presence. So come and join in the celebration of history's greatest moment. Find yourself this Sunday swelling the chorus with your own grateful heart song. He is RISEN!!!

Have a blessed week,

*Pastor*

Pastor

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

## Spiritual Anopsia

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*And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.  
– John 20:14 –*

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For Mary Magdalene, the theological implications of Christ's apparent defeat at Calvary were overshadowed by the most immense grief. Early the first day of the week, even the fear of her past demonic agitators and the potential of their return could not overpower the sense of mournful duty that drove her to the tomb. She had to pay homage to the One who had not only liberated her from Hell's power but had also proven to be her chief joy over the last several years. Hasting to the grave at sabbath's end to simply weep over her dead Savior was the most appropriate thing to do for a heart so overwhelmed.

Her initial visit that morning found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. She ran back to tell the others. Peter and John ran to the tomb and returned home in wonder and amazement. When Mary returned again, the grief that had been interrupted by confusion returned in force. Grappling with the myriad of plausible explanations as to the whereabouts of the body, it would appear that she gave no serious consideration to the Lord's oft-repeated promise of resurrection. *By yielding to the natural, she missed the supernatural.* It would be somewhat comical if it were not so sad. When questioned, "Woman, why weepest thou?", Mary could only matter-of-factly answer her heavenly visitants, "Because they have taken away my Lord." And then, when the risen Lord Himself inquired the reason for her sorrow, she pathetically supposes Him to be the gardener. *Alas, she could not see Jesus through her tears.*

Anopsia is the medical term for a defect in the physiological field of vision. Mary's surrender to her sorrow on Resurrection morning reminds us that a similar malady can exist in our spiritual perspective as well. When we inordinately yield to our emotions, as powerful or as justified as they may be, faith is subjugated to a secondary position and we miss our resurrected Christ's ever-near proximity to His beloved.

Thankfully, He knows our frame and remembers that we are dust. For the faithful heart, as overcharged as it may be by the sadness of a moment, Jesus needs merely to whisper our name. "Mary." Like the devils, sorrow must flee away. With faith revived, we find ourselves happily again at His feet. And here in His presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

Burdened reader, Jesus is nearby. He defeated the grave, so neither your sorrow nor its cause is any match for Him. Listen. He calls your name.

## Fixed Focus

*While we look not at things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal*

*2 Corinthians 4:18*

Paying close attention to details and focusing are important disciplines that serve us well both in our vocations and daily life. From the neurosurgeon to the auto mechanic, focusing on the task at hand is necessary for a successful outcome. Being distracted has many, and often negative, implications. It is also important to prioritize our focus of regarding what is essential and non-essential.

Today's verse emphasizes the importance of the eternal and its difference when compared to the temporal. As Christians, our faith brought us to the Savior whom we had never seen, and it is by that same faith that we are to walk out our earthly pilgrimage. Along life's journey there are many temporal things capable of catching our attention and demanding time and service from us. Though temporal things can serve a purpose, they were never meant to be the center of our attention. Jobs, houses, cars, schedules, activities, and a host of other things occupy us every day; yet they should play a lesser role when compared to eternal endeavors. It is important to consider and compare the eternal with the temporal in each daily situation as they occur. When severe tests and temptations arise in our life causing unwelcomed pressure, it helps to remember that tests can serve the purpose of strengthening our faith, but it also helps to remember that tests and trials are merely temporary. Focusing on the unseen eternal things keeps us spiritually grounded and can serve to enable us to escape the temporary allurements that divert us from the narrow way. When the Lord Jesus and His promise of heaven come into focus, our view of the temporary entrapments becomes keener and the attraction less intense. Seeing the true value of eternal things helps us to commit to *laying up treasure in heaven, where neither moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.*

Solomon with his inspired wisdom wrote: *The way of life is above to the wise.* May our focus in life reflect our eternal destiny, as we travel this ephemeral earth. ~J. Ekis

## Dependent obedience

*And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go.*

*Judges 4:8*

In this account of God's fourth deliverance of the people of Israel in the days of the judges, this answer of the chosen captain to the prophetess Deborah is typically cast in a negative light. The context could also lead us in this direction, based on Deborah's response in the next verse, where she agrees to go with Barak to the place of assembling the army, but prophesies that he will forfeit the honor of victory to a woman. Yet in Hebrews chapter 11, where the Old Testament heroes of faith are enumerated, we see Barak listed, as only one of four judges named there from the longer list in the book of Judges. What are we to make of this? Was Barak simply a coward, not willing to go to battle without a woman to lead him? We often hear this portrayal of him, even though the author of Hebrews lifts him before us as a man of faith.

Among other things, we need only take a step back and look at the rest of the heroes on the Hebrews 11 list to realize that most of these heroes of faith also had their flaws revealed in scripture. Not only is this an evidence of Biblical inspiration, but it is also an encouragement to us, who also have our flaws. Our exhortation is to see how God would still use their faith, in spite of them, to accomplish His will and glorify Himself.

As we view Barak in the entire context of this account, we note that he obeys the word of the Lord as prophesied by Deborah. In the face of a formidable adversary, with 900 iron chariots ready to mow down Barak and his 10,000 Israelite foot soldiers, he descended Mount Tabor into the battle, only to see the Lord come and fight for them, confound the enemy, and empower them on to victory. This does not sound like a coward. After twenty years of oppression from these Canaanite charioteers, which was brought on by the idolatrous practices of Barak's countrymen, perhaps he had good reason to want to validate Deborah's prophecy, as well as keep the word of the Lord close at hand for clear direction, which he received from her when it was time to strike, under the power of God's deliverance. This he did at variance with any expectation for him to simply run with the initial command and trust in his own ability to discern his next steps. It was evidently more important for him to affirm God's direction than to gain the honor of the victory. The conclusion of the story is that God had the honor of the victory (Judges 4:23); the woman Jael is not mentioned in Hebrews 11.

So let us glean the lessons of faith, from yet another imperfect example, and apply dependent obedience for the honor of the Lord God.

## **Fringe benefits**

*Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue:*

*And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring:*

*That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God.  
Numbers 15:38-40*

There are many things that we all must remember on some periodic basis, and we probably all have different kinds of reminders to help us. It seems that the older we get, there is more to remember, and we have less capacity to do so. We also understand that some things are more important to remember than others. We had better remember to pay the electric bill each month if we would continue to enjoy the pleasure of lights, appliances, etc. Some have important medications that must be remembered daily to maintain health. So we may use notes to ourselves, signs, electronic reminders, or other modern amenities to make sure we take care of priority tasks.

God who made us knows our need for reminders, and here He gives the Israelites a curious command to create a specific reminder. They were to attach these fringes with blue ribbands to their outer garment, which would typically be white, to evidently stand out and grab their attention, as a reminder of their privilege as God's people to know the commandments of the Lord and to do them. We can observe as we read of their experiences in these books that, even though the Israelites had seen many mighty works of the Lord, they were quick to forget. Psalm 106 rehearses a litany of examples of this problem. This constant reminder, connected right to their garment that they wore every day, would be a help for their spiritual well-being, and therefore life in general, if they would heed it.

In this New Testament time, as the people of God, we have been given a reminder in an even closer place than our garment. We live in the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy that God would write his law "in their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10). This we enjoy through the blessed indwelling Holy Spirit, who is promised to bring what He has said to the remembrance of His disciples (John 14:26). As we daily put on our garments, let us remember that He has clothed us with the garment of salvation, and pay attention to the call of His Spirit to hear and heed His words. There is no greater priority or privilege.



# Pastors Thoughts of the Week

## Only For a Season

*And when the devil had ended all the temptation,  
he departed from him for a season. Luke 4:13:*

When the Lord returns to this earth to establish His kingdom, one of the many benefits of His reign will be that Satan will be bound in the bottomless pit for a thousand years. We can hardly imagine a world devoid of the incessant and aggravating influences of that malevolent enemy of mankind. That unholy architect of every vile thought, word, and deed shall be exiled to his infernal habitat. But, alas, he will again be "loosed a little season" Rev. 20:3 to plague the millennial inhabitants who had enjoyed peace on earth and good will toward men. Part of the mystery of free will includes the necessity for that will to be put to the test. And so Satan is thus permitted a reprise and, sadly, a multitude will fall prey to his deceptions and rebel against their magnanimous King.

It should come as no surprise to us that after pummeling Jesus with every evil device that he could ever tempt a human with, and that with no success, that "he departed from him for a season". A wise general knows when he has been bested and makes a hasty retreat so as to regroup and replot his next strategy. He most certainly did return with new stratagems intended to gain the advantage and foil the "last Adam" as he did the first. But our champion perspicaciously saw through those snares and was "not ignorant of his devices" even when the assault was propositioned by one of his own disciples. "Get thee behind me Satan" was his potent response to those solicitations to evil.

The devil may leave us alone for a season but we must be ever vigilant and circumspect realizing that our enemy is only retreated long enough until he believes we have let our guard down. Then he who "walketh about seeking whom he may devour" will rapaciously return "to steal, and to kill, and to destroy". But this shall not always be the case. There is a terminus to this soul-hungry fiend. Revelation 20:10: "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone".

There is a glad day in which the serpent's head will be crushed and those "who are taken captive by him at his will" finally freed from these assaults and we may with unmolested minds offer eternal praise to our Divine Liberator.

Have a blessed week,

*Pastor*

Pastor

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

## The Wrath of the Lamb

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*And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?*  
– Revelation 6:16-17 –

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It was John the Baptist that first recognized our Lord as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. The whole of our Lord's ministry and character served as advertisement of His primary mission as God's Lamb. A bruised reed He never broke and a smoking flax He never quenched. He showed compassion on the multitudes as well as to every individual suppliant. He neither cried nor lifted up His voice. Even at His mock trial and ultimate crucifixion, He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth.

So why do we find this paradoxical expression – the wrath of the Lamb – in Revelation six? It is uttered by fallen mankind at the climactic moment of final divine retribution upon the whole earth. It seems to spew forth as a pent-up confession of the conscience yet is unaccompanied by repentance of the heart.

Recall that Jesus is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Every unregenerate person who has heard of our Lord *innately understands Who He is*, yet they choose to heed the devil's malevolent whisperings to their benighted souls. Consider that it is Christ's name exclusively that men use to curse and blaspheme. Consider that it is He, of all religious figures, Who is mocked incessantly in literature, academia, and the entertainment industry. Consider that, in the realms of the occult and paranormal, the New Age spirit masters and those asserting contact with supposed extraterrestrials instruct their devotees that it is one Individual in all of human history about whom mankind is mistaken – i.e., that Christ was misinterpreted and never meant to claim Divinity. Why such attacks against the innocent Lamb of Calvary? *It can only be because they know exactly Who He is yet are trying to convince themselves otherwise.*

But such were some of us. Before our conversion, we likely knew Jesus to be God, yet we were unwilling to surrender our hearts to Him. Our lost friends, neighbors, family, and acquaintances *know Who He is as well*. Let us not lose heart, but rather offer up earnest intercession. Then let us give them the credible witness of genuine love, converted behavior, and when opportunity is secured, a direct gospel presentation, that they may repent and never have to utter, "Hide us from the wrath of Lamb. For the great day of His wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?"

## The Source of Help

*O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help.*

*Hosea 13:9*

A common theme throughout the prophetic books of the Bible, is that God's people had gone astray, and the prophets were pointing them back to their true God. Disobedience and idol worship had lowered the nation Israel to the depths of depravity. Divine chastisements coupled with the prophet's message were designed by God to help His people return to Him. Hosea reminds the nation that their destruction was their own fault; but their help was found in the Lord.

In similar ways, Biblical events are often repeated with nations, or even individual lives, throughout history. A glaring example is the current condition of our own country. Social unrest, political division, continual violence, disintegration of the family, secularism, atheism, and apathy toward true faith in God, have permeated every corner of our country; and pose greater threats than any enemy nation. Historical lessons of the past are ignored, and science has been touted as the great solution to our problems. Through the pride of our national countenance, we seek not God: God is not in all our thoughts. Still, we continue down the broad road to destruction. We need to hear the Lord saying *but in Me is thine help.*

Hosea's admonition can also go beyond a nation, and is applicable to our own lives. Before conversion, in varying degrees, through both ignorance and willful disobedience, we also had destructive lifestyles. Whether by pride or stubbornness, we forfeited our relationship with God while futilely trying to satisfy our unquenchable carnal nature. By God's amazing grace, His divine light penetrated our blinded eyes enabling us to see the true source of help. Even after our conversion, losing our spiritual focus and making sinful choices will hinder God's work in us and through us. Our prideful self-reliance interferes with His divine working and the pure work of God.

Throughout the biblical accounts there is example after example that shows our true source of strength and help is in God. These accounts are for our edification and for us to always remember that our *help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.* ~J. Ekis

## Stirred to Confrontation

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*Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.*

*– Acts 17:16-17 –*

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Athens was a philosophical and cultural epicenter of the pagan world of Paul's day. As the Apostle found himself in this city, he did not regard the visit as any opportunity for respite. Behind the exquisite architecture and rich history, Paul saw the pathetic spiritual reality. It was a city "wholly given to idolatry." This condition, despite any of its other apparent advantages or refinements, made it a stench to a Holy God and thus a wide-open mission field. (For the same God who hated its idolatry sent His Son to die for its blinded idolators!)

It is as instructive to note what Paul *did not do* at this moment as it is to consider what he *did do*. Note that Paul did not simply ignore or accept the spiritually degenerate condition of the city and its inhabitants. He did not (at least exclusively or merely) "pray for them." He did not try to "understand" them. He did not attempt to find any kind of lasting common ground with them. Instead, he permitted his spiritual insight to *stir him to confrontation*. He engaged *his* heart in order to engage *theirs*. He knew that, while they did not realize it, they were in bondage, and that the truth he held in his soul could make them free. "Therefore disputed he." The thinking in this city was at odds with God's, no matter the walk of life – be it the Jews of the synagogue, the devotees of the idols, or the everyday common man in the marketplace just trying to get by. *They all needed challenged and changed.* "Therefore disputed he."

As Christians, we possess the mind of Christ. We must not esteem the lost world around us by its facades. Behind it all lies a stark spiritual reality of complete alienation from God. Our friends and loved ones who do not know our Christ are "wholly given to idolatry" (for self is the most ubiquitous idol of all). Are we simply accepting that as a sad fact, or is our spirit stirred within us to change it? We were not converted until someone confronted us with the error of our thinking. This must be done lovingly, yes – *but it must be done*, if they are ever to join us on Heaven's shores.

Heavenly Father, help us to be stirred to lovingly confront someone with the good news of Jesus Christ today.

-- D. Murcek

## Positional righteousness

*Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it. He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them.*  
*Numbers 23:20-21*

As Balak the king of Moab had attempted to hire Balaam the prophet to curse the nation of Israel, he was continually frustrated by utterances such as this from the prophet. Balaam is clearly identified throughout scripture as a false prophet and an enemy of Israel, from Numbers 31:8 & 16 through Revelation 2:14; yet in this circumstance God overruled any attempt from Balaam to curse His chosen nation. Instead we see Him assign multiple prophetic blessings, such as this one, upon the nation, even through the lips of this unseemly prophet. Once again we see the sovereignty of God working in the affairs of men. However, the appearance of these blessings in the context of the surrounding accounts of the Israelites' attitudes and behaviors, in the trek from Egypt and in the wilderness wanderings, only accentuates our understanding of God's sovereign prerogatives. In fact, not long after this we find the account in Numbers 25 of Israelite leaders committing lewd idolatrous practices with the Moabites, evidently through Balaam's influence (see 31:16). Therefore, from the blessing uttered here, that God beheld no iniquity in Jacob, the obvious conclusion must be that the righteous position of the nation before God was not a function of the nation's behavior. Instead, God's vision of the nation, as proclaimed here by Balaam, must be connected with His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which was intrinsically tied to His promise and their belief of it.

We understand from this declaration and many others in scripture, from both the old covenant and the new, that God's declaration of righteousness is based on the integrity of His promises and not on human behavior. For this we should be immensely grateful. Lest we should feel contempt for the Israelites as we read through their unthankful and unfaithful experiences in the wilderness, we need only step back and view many of our own attitudes and behaviors in contrast to God's faithful promises in our New Testament economy. To think that we in our current state could be declared righteous by the Holy One makes us remember the basis for our salvation, "that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:19, 21). So He offered Himself in our place, "to declare ... at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:26). Therefore we can conclude with the apostle, "where is boasting then? It is excluded." Let us be humbly grateful.

# Pastors Thoughts of the Week

## Darkness Which May Be Felt

*John 6:17: And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.*

Momentarily bereft of their Master, the disciples launched out into the uncertain waters unaware of the impending tempest that awaited them. As the unruly winds took command of their fragile boat, terror took command of their fearful hearts. Their toilsome rowing was all but in vain as the contrary winds had made a full arrest of the jeopardized vessel. The darkness heightened their anxiety as they "wished for the day". If only the Lord was with them to captain their bark through the unrelenting wind and the thick gloom. And (as the apostle Paul would on a different occasion exclaim "no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away") just then heard they the assuring voice through the raging winds: "It is I; be not afraid". The Master of the sea, whose will the billows must obey, came to them and was readily received into the tortured craft. In a moment the sea was calmed and the boat brought immediately to its desired harbor.

Though seemingly absent from His followers, the Lord's eyes were ever on that vessel and when the testing of their faith reached its zenith, the Lord appeared to mitigate the danger. Isaiah 54:7: *For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee.*

There are times of tribulation where it may seem that the Lord has forsaken us. In the darkness we wonder why He has not come to us. Here is where we, like Moses, must endure "as seeing him who is invisible". One of the ten plagues that befell the recalcitrant Pharaoh and every Egyptian house was a "darkness which may be felt". The faithful Jews had an exemption for "all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings". No matter how impenetrable the darkness that pervades this world, the believer has the promise of His abiding light.

Have a blessed week

*Pastor*

Pastor

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

## Accountability

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*So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.  
– Romans 14:12 –*

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Our modern world has been poisoned by psychology. This anti-Christian pseudo-science permeates every layer of our culture, from medical practice to education to entertainment. We are incessantly assaulted with its messaging that our failures are someone else's fault. The devilish doctrine of behaviorism has created an epidemic victimhood that has become the philosophical foundation of multitudes, spawning nihilistic lifestyles and increasing the chasm that must be bridged to gain eternity for every soul intoxicated therewith. The generation that are pure in their own eyes and yet not washed from their own filthiness (Prov. 30:11-12) is unfortunately upon us.

Since Adam fell in the Garden and God came calling in the cool of the day, man has been trying to hide himself from the inevitable encounter with his Maker. The fact that in our fallen condition we tend to get disillusioned by our failures and question our purpose bears witness to the fact that *we intrinsically understand that life indeed has significant meaning*. As moral agents, no matter the excuse making, we know deep within that the breath we possess is not our own – that it was given to us not only to spend, but to invest. Though alienated from God, the augustness of creation, the prodding of the conscience, and the express witness of the Gospel all continuously call fallen man to prepare to meet his God and to give an account of the life he has lived.

As believers, it is vitally important that we both embrace and propagate the truth that “every one of us shall give of account of Himself to God.” Being adopted into the family of God, our own accountability takes on new characteristics. Rather than a mere sheer dread, we now find love to be a chief motivator. While we are not looking to abnegate our instinct to thrive in this world, we actually begin to feel comfortable with the notion of exit upon His call. Because He died for us, our chief desire is to live for Him, that we might be prepared to present Him with some return on His investment. When in right relationship with Him, the promise of His “Well done, good and faithful servant” is the heartbeat of the soul.

The lost world around us is hiding from God and making excuse yet knowing they must give account. Our redeemed lives should bear brilliant witness that what they fear, we embrace, which in turn gives us certitude of purpose. And such purpose can be theirs as well if they will simply call upon Him while He is near.

## Hungry Souls

*I have compassion on the multitude because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat: And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far. - Mark 8:2,3*

In Mark 8 and Matthew 15 we find the account of the miraculous feeding of the four thousand. From this account we can glean many lessons about how the Lord provides for His people and the endless supply of His abundance. But there also are lessons to be gained from the unnamed multitude who were in attendance for that miracle. Prior to the miraculous feeding, the people had been with Jesus for three days, and many of them had come a great distance just to see and hear Him. After being in the presence of Jesus for those three days, their food supply was exhausted and Jesus was concerned about their welfare for their journey home.

The first lesson is that many of them traveled a great distance to see Jesus. In order to desire to see Him, they first had to hear about Him. Acting by faith in what they had heard, they diligently traveled from afar to see and hear the Lord. Their time with Jesus was well worth any sacrifice made.

Another lesson we observe is the dedication of the multitude. The fact that they ran out of food indicates that they probably had just enough for a short period of time. Being in the Lord's presence and captivated by His person and teachings surely caused them to stay longer than their food supply allowed. The feeding of their souls with the message of hope and salvation was more important to them than the filling of their bellies. Their preoccupation of time with the Lord produced a nourishment that satisfied the soul.

The effort of the multitude to be in the presence of the Lord should both inspire and convict us. We have the inspired written word which we can easily go to every day that allows us to see and also hear from our Lord. No need to travel far or deprive ourselves of food, but we do have to choose to take time to be in His presence. It is important for us to position ourselves in a location and atmosphere to best see and hear him that we may receive full nourishment for our souls. - J. Ekis

## **A Lesson from the Publicans**

*And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.*

*Luke 18:13*

The word *publican* is mentioned twenty-two times in the New Testament. Simply put, publicans were Jews who were appointed as tax collectors by the Roman government; so, it followed that they were despised by their own people. Acquiring an infamous reputation, publicans were associated with the outcasts of society: harlots and sinners. There are lessons to be learned from two named publicans, Matthew (first known as Levi) and Zacchaeus, and the unnamed one in Luke eighteen.

The first lesson is from Mark's account of Levi's calling. We see his willingness to forsake all and follow Jesus and the impact of that powerful decision. After quickly responding to the invitation, he brings Jesus to his home where other publicans and sinners are assembled. Hearing of Levi's conversion as well as meeting the Savior causes them to see their need and also choose to follow Jesus.

The second lesson is learned from the example of Zacchaeus' diligence to see Jesus. The crowd and his diminutive stature would not deter his opportunity. He runs, he climbs, and is rewarded by the Lord looking up at him in the tree and speaking to him. Zacchaeus is so affected by this experience that he vows to give half of his goods to the poor and to right the wrongs that he has previously committed.

Finally, we meet the unnamed publican in today's text as he displays great reverence and respect for God. Unlike the Pharisee, his awareness of his own sinfulness while in the presence of God's holiness prevents him from presumptuously standing in his own righteousness. Smiting his breast in remorse, he would not even look up to the Lord. Realizing that there is no impressing the God who sees our hearts, minds, and motives, he utters a simple and sincere prayer. Pleading for God's mercy, he demonstrates his understanding of what is necessary for true salvation. Our Lord contrasts the Pharisee and the publican. One was blinded by his self-righteousness, while the other was aware that he was a sinner in need of mercy.

We would do well to learn from these three publicans who were rewarded by the Lord.

J. Ekis

## Lay hold

*Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.*

*I Timothy 6:12*

Most occurrences of this expression in our Bible are literal and often negative actions. For example, the first describes the action of the parents of a stubborn and rebellious son as they lay hold and bring him to the city judges for capital punishment (Deuteronomy 21:19). Jeroboam uses these words in his command to his servants to capture the prophet who had condemned him (I Kings 13:4). Isaiah refers to a lion laying hold of its prey to carry it away (Isaiah 5:29). Jeremiah speaks of warriors laying hold on bows and spears to administer cruelty (Jeremiah 6:23). Jesus speaks of a man laying hold on his sheep to pull it out of a pit to safety (Matthew 12:11). These many examples share the common connotation that there is no consideration of letting go.

In the application of our text we find a very positive connotation, which actually occurs twice in this chapter. Only once in the Old Testament is there a similarly positive use of these words, where Solomon states that wisdom is “a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:18). However, in these positive yet figurative applications, we dare not diminish the meaning derived from the literal uses. Just as we understand the literal to refer to a firm and unyielding grasp of something or someone, in the same way we ought to apply this expression to the metaphorical. As the hands can lay hold on a physical object, so the mind and heart can do the same to the spiritual. We often refer to someone grasping an idea or concept with the mind. In a greater manner we can with our spirit lay hold on all that we have been given to understand of eternal life, by God’s word and wisdom. As Paul exhorts Timothy to lay hold on eternal life, he refers not to an ephemeral wish, but to a steadfast hope, which grows stronger as we apply ourselves in the good fight of faith. That fight of faith has a solid basis in the truth of the word of God, which is the anchor of our soul that keeps us from being tossed by every wind of doctrine. Therefore, with the blessed gift of faith let us continually exercise our spirits to lay hold and hold fast that for which Christ Jesus has apprehended us.

# Pastors Thoughts of the Week

## The Joy of Beholding Him

*Acts 2:28: Thou hast made known to me the ways of life;  
thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance.*

The disciples had endured the trauma of witnessing the barbarous cruelty inflicted upon their Master. The three days following were spent in doleful lamentation as they contemplated a destiny bereft of their Lord. And then, as Jesus foretold, their *"sorrow was turned into joy"*. One can try to imagine the mingled amazement and inexpressible joy that accompanied that moment when they gazed anew upon His glorified countenance. Their last spectacle of Jesus on the cross was too gruesome a recollection as they *"hid as it were their faces from Him"* but now they basked in the radiance of the resurrected King of Glory. They enjoyed forty days of fellowship and teaching to prepare them for the great commission that lay before them; and through that protracted visitation their joy was never diminished. Even after the Lord's ascension *"they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy"*.

When one contemplates the multiplied pleasures of heaven, we must give precedence to that wonderful moment when we *"shall see his face"*. There is He in resplendent glory surrounded by ten thousands of His saints rightfully receiving the glory that is due unto Him. We will stand there in transfixed consideration of a beauty that surpasses verbal description. And we, *"faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy"*, will have those remaining vestiges of sin purged from our hearts and be made pure as He is pure. For John assures us that *"we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure"*. What salubrious propensities there must be in that beatific countenance, the beholding of which should impart such a benefit!

Moses descended Sinai with the glow of shekinah glory reflected on his face. Forty days in dialogue with the Almighty produced that dazzling effect, yet we are reminded that *"no man shall see God and live"*. So in some way God was shrouded so that Moses could see Him, as it were, in part. David prays *"that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord"*. This will be the happy preoccupation of heaven. The radiance from His glorious presence will most certainly thrill the ardent saint and *"everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away."* Rejoice, oh saints of God, in this joyous prospect!

Have a blessed week,

*Pastor*

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

## Certain and Sure

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*... the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.*

*– Daniel 2:45 –*

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When Daniel boldly stood before King Nebuchadnezzar, revealing the enigmatic dream and interpreting its meaning, he summarized the truth of the vision as “certain” and its interpretation as “sure”. What was specifically true of God’s gracious disclosure to this pagan king is distinctively true of all of His character and revelation to mankind.

Perhaps the most unique characteristic of the Word of God is the certainty of its truth, while one of the most comforting attributes of the God of the Word is the surety of His character. This markedly distinguishes Him and His Word from the silly deities of the nations, the cunningly devised fables that accompany their worship, or the relativism of secularists and atheists.

One of the ways God mocked the occultists of Isaiah’s day was by characterizing the obfuscatory and unstable nature of their belief systems as “peeping” and “muttering” (Isa. 8:19). This same instability holds strikingly true of false religion and secular humanism today. The Koran is a chimerical and contradictory tome that makes little clear other than that murder and bloodletting somehow pleases Allah. The catechetical teachings of Rome have confused billions of souls as to what exactly needs to be done to gain eternal bliss. And our political and scientific “experts” frequently tell us one thing today and something completely different tomorrow. *Yet surprisingly, broad swaths of mankind place their trust in these.*

One of the saddest byproducts of all of this confusion is that many Christians tend to feel shy about the certainty of their faith. But this ought never be so. We have a God who changes not and whose promises are not yea and nay, but yea and amen! Paul declared, “I know whom I have believed,” and such confidence can and should be ours as well. We need not make intellectual apologies for our God or His Word. *His truth must be wholly believed and boldly asserted.* Imagine if Daniel had been tentative about the interpretation of the king’s dream, or if Peter tried to explain rather than proclaim the newly resurrected Christ, or if Paul had blushed before Festus!

Let us revel in the surety of our God, and may we resolve to unabashedly attest to the certainty of His truth. While our confidence may disgust the foolish, it will prove an attractive oasis to the honest seeker who is aimlessly wandering through this dry and thirsty land. And, like Nebuchadnezzar, they may be moved thereby to recognize that God is in us of a truth.

*-- D. Murcek*

## **Our Conversation**

*Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ*

*Philippians 1:27*

Conversations are a major part of everyday life. Whether at work, at home, at church, or some recreational activity, there are always conversations. You can tell a lot about a person by hearing them talk. Not only the content of their words, but also the voice inflections and attitudes behind the words can reveal much about who a person really is. The meaning of the King James word conversation conveys much more than merely the words exchanged between people. The word encompasses all that a person says and does, as well as their manner of life.

Significantly, our decision to trust Christ for salvation will change the location of our eternal destination; but, importantly, it should also do far more than that. God's design is to change all of who we are. Faith in God was never intended to be compartmentalized exclusively to church-related activities. Attending church, hearing the Word taught and preached, and fellowshiping with the saints, are important parts of our Christian life; but those activities make up only a small fraction of the hours in our week. Our faith is to be an integral part of all aspects and moments of our life. Every day we are presented with situations where our words and actions are to reflect the Savior who dwells within us. With the Lord leading our steps, our contact with others presents a two-sided opportunity. On one side we are to allow the power of God's light to shine to others through our words and deeds, and on the other side we are to observe and learn from others. Our spiritual feeding should expand beyond the walls of the church and into our homes. The homelife should worthily demonstrate the effects of the gospel. Personal Bible study and prayer should become as natural as eating. The consciousness of being an ambassador for Christ should not just be in public; but in private as well. With scriptures reminding us that Christ lives within us and that we are new creatures, the believer's manner of life is to speak favorably of the gospel at all times and everywhere.

Today is another day to let our conversation radiate with the light of the gospel and bring glory to our Savior.

J. Ekis

## Esteem

*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*

*Philippians 2:3*

The epistle to the Philippians is sometimes referred to as the epistle of joy and rejoicing. Not only does the apostle make repeated reference to this theme, but it finds its place among commendations and exhortations for them to continue in good spiritual desires and practices. There is an obvious love and thankfulness for this church flowing through the letter. But he also knows that he is writing to a church full of flawed individuals who had required redemption. In that case, his love for them also constrained him to exhort them concerning temptations to sin that would come upon and between them. Later in the epistle, he even names individuals, exhorting them particularly to pursue the unity that he began to describe in this chapter. The lesson is clear. No matter how many commendable characteristics a church body may have, we are all subject to temptation to sin as long as we are in this flesh. And especially in the condition where the one and only thing that brings most of us together is the common salvation that makes us one in Christ, there is plenty of opportunity in each of our old natures for the devil to exploit our differences.

When was the last time you asked your natural self – the “old man” that Paul describes in Ephesians and Colossians – who is better than you? We know what that response is. Our old natures are bound up in our own ways and opinions, like the storybook witch with her mirror on the wall. There may be areas of our lives that the Spirit of God has cleaned up or is working to change, yet our inward selfish human natures can lead the newest or oldest saint into that pit of vainglory, which ultimately results in strife when two of them meet. So we can be thankful for admonitions like this one, which remind us of our need to refuse the temptation to believe our old self, and to instead pursue esteeming others better. And just in case this one command is insufficient for our stubborn souls, it is followed by the overwhelming description of the humility that our sinless Savior displayed, to esteem us worthy of so great salvation. Need we any other motivation to heed this command?

## Whosoever

*After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.*

*Revelation 7:9-10*

It is noteworthy that this great multitude that comes out of great tribulation, with white robes washed in the blood of the Lamb (see verse 14), is innumerable from all nations, kindreds, people, and tongues. This is another attestation to the perception by the apostle Peter at the house of Cornelius that “God is no respecter of persons.” Here these descendants from the race of Adam are doing what Adam was created to do, as they stand before the throne of God proclaiming with a loud voice the greatness of His salvation through the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. It is glorious to be reminded that the gospel applies across all the boundaries of mankind. The common inheritance across all of these boundaries is the sinful nature that came from Adam. Thus, all nations share the need of cleansing and forgiveness of sin, as proclaimed by the apostle Paul, “Wherefore, as by one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Romans 6:12). Then he provides the gospel solution: “For as by one man's disobedience [Adam's] many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one [Jesus] shall many be made righteous” (Romans 6:19). With that knowledge this multitude will join together in praise and adoration of the Lamb of their salvation, each individually as well as collectively, as they share together in the riches of His grace and the presence of His glory. As the common problem of human sin brought the dividing of nations and tongues, to keep mankind from collectively destroying themselves (Genesis 11:6-8), so the only solution for sin will bring together redeemed mankind, to see past all barriers as they look upon Him and celebrate His matchless grace. It is notable that the boundaries remain evident in this text, yet they are transparent with respect to the single purpose of the throng. As it will be in presence in that day, should it not be in attitude in the present?