

May 22 - Ephesians 2:1-7
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
From Death to Life

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved -- 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Devotion:

Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) shared a process of spiritual discernment for Christians whose goal was to seek God's purpose for their lives. The most important rule is, "The love which moves me and makes me choose something has to descend from above, from the love of God."

The language in Ephesians points to God who turns his people around and replaces our sinful choices with the richness of God. Truly God has led us from death in sin to new life in Christ. The story of the Christian is a turnaround story, replacing what was with what might be.

We need to remember that we were dead outside of God's will because we followed our natural inclinations. If it were not for God's mercy, we would have remained apart from God, still in our sin. Today the majority of people live only for themselves and their desires. Ephesians calls this disobedience -- living unto the passions of the flesh -- without any thought for anyone else. This path is not good and the final outcome will not be good.

Then the mighty three lettered word interrupts our downward spiral -- (but). "But God, who is rich in mercy" intervened on our behalf. Why did God intervene? God's motive is derived out of the great love with which he loves us. Even when we could not see a new way, God's way, God did! Instead of flailing around in our trespasses, God set us on a new path.

This new path, this new way of life is overwhelming because of the manifold blessings bestowed upon us. This is the way of grace! Grace takes us and raises us up with Christ and makes us alive in him. Grace reveals the true character of God -- which we might be able to participate in the immeasurable riches of his grace!

On the day after Ascension Day, we give thanks to God, who through Jesus Christ extended grace to us. Grace is God's gift to us and our love for others is our response to God's gift of grace. How can we live any other way?

Prayer:

God of grace, make us thankful of your gift to us. Give us the desire to share your love with everyone. Amen.

May 23 - John 8:21-30**by Dr. Charles Qualls*****Dispute Over Who Jesus Is***

21 Again he said to them, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." 22 Then the Jews said, "Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" 23 He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." 25 They said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Why do I speak to you at all? 26 I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." 27 They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. 29 And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." 30 As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

Devotion:

"Once more..." invites us to remember what we already know. The gentle Bible study leader or preacher would point out that readers should recall that Jesus didn't just die. He had been telling his followers that the end was coming. Now, in John's gospel we encounter here what will turn out to be the second time Jesus foretold of his impending death. (A third foretelling is coming up in John 14.)

Sometimes, we have plenty of opportunities to pick up on what is happening around us. Not as an excuse, but also as a reminder, I would point out that our confirmation bias colors what we actually comprehend or retain. That is, we tend to see what we want to see and we hear what we want to hear. Jesus' tormentors did not believe he was who he said he was. So they kept tormenting him. His followers did not want him to die, and therefore minimized his own promises that his death was imminent.

This is happening in our own day all around us. Including to some extent with you. You want this news source to be "reliable" and that one to be "biased," so they are. You want this politician to be competent and trustworthy so they are, and you want the other one to be a villain. So he or she is. You want to be safe about the Coronavirus, so one set of guidelines and resources make sense. You want freedom to go about your business, so another strategy and set of resources make sense.

Some Christians in history have villainized the Jews for killing Jesus. A mature and biblically literate reading of the larger scripture reveals that it was humanity instead. We

all killed Jesus. Be careful how you read the Passion narratives in the gospels. Recall that one of his closest followers accepted money to betray him, and the gospels are clear that Judas disagreed with where Jesus was heading.

Now, we have a predictable exchange. "Well, what are you going to do -- kill yourself?" "No...you will kill me." Eventually they asked him, "Who are you?" Translators debate what is said in v25, as Jesus responds to them. Most versions say something like, "Well, what have I told you from the beginning?" But there is the possibility that what he really said was, "Why do I talk to you at all?"

History will reveal what was what regarding the things of our days. The scripture reveals what was what regarding Jesus by the time of the Crucifixion and then the Resurrection. He told them here, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he." Our gospels indicate that it was so.

Prayer:

Lord, you were so patient as you dealt with fragile, distracted followers. And, with the persecutors who were so diligent. Eventually, though, patience wears thin. May we hear what you are saying and then live according to what we have heard. Help us, because we need your help. Amen.

May 24 - Acts 1:6-14

by Dr. Charles Qualls

Why Are You Just Standing There Looking Up?

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*"

7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to

prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Devotion:

I love the question that leads off our scripture text this week. Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? We live in the Covid-19 age as I write this. I noted today that our congregation has missed the last 7 weeks of worship face-to-face. Which is one week less of missed services than many who stopped gathering a week earlier than we did. That's a long time to be without a gathering of the spiritual body. I miss it terribly. I miss YOU terribly.

The hard news is that when we resume gathering, nothing will be quite like it was. Not for a long time still, if ever. We are in the midst of an intentional period of planning for the resumption of "church." All of this is to try to ramp back up toward what we were. Sadly, or perhaps gladly, nothing will reset itself quite back at "normal." Whatever we were, we are likely to be a little different when the dust finally settles.

Jesus' closest followers had walked miles with him. They had listened to his teaching and had worshipped with him. Then, they saw him be crucified and die. Finally, after he appeared to them in resurrection they would eventually see him ascend to heaven. Still, they wondered if "now" -- this -- might be the time that the Lord restored the kingdom of God to Israel. They were determined to get back what their people had long ago lost before them.

What should we be looking for the Spirit to lead us to do these days? Why will our gatherings remain so central to our personal faithfulness -- even if nothing is ever quite the same? I hope you are letting yourself think about things like this occasionally. If not, I invite you to do that now.

Jesus' own closest followers were gathered as he ascended toward Heaven. No sooner had they seen this happen than two robed strangers among them asked, "*Why are you standing there looking up at the sky?*" The obvious message is that it was time to get on with life. But their life they "got on with" was far from what it had been. Now, the Spirit had come to fill the void Jesus had left. But life inhabited and led by the Spirit wasn't at all what life following Jesus around had been. Now, they were responsible for the ministry at hand.

Why don't we do what Jesus' followers did right then? Notice that they returned to Jerusalem and prayed. Even Mary, Jesus' own mother, was among them praying. Why don't we also be prayerful even now?

Prayer:

Be praying for: A) Our local leadership and businesses, that the best decisions would be made for the greater good, B) Our church leadership as it works actively to set a timeline and best practices for resuming the gathered church and C) that God would lead you to participate toward the greater good, even when that runs contrary to what you had hoped.

May 25 - 1 Peter 4:1-6
by Dr. Charles Qualls
Good Stewards of God's Grace

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), 2 so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. 3 You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. 5 But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

Devotion:

Jaylend was 18 years old and had just accepted a major college football scholarship when the accident happened. Fact is, he hadn't yet even signed the paperwork. There was no official commitment except a handshake and a verbal agreement between coach and prospect. From a tiny southern town in North Carolina, if he completed college that would be a big deal. Forget football; no one else in his family had ever been to college.

An ATV accident necessitated brain surgery to save his life. Neurological damage left him with diminished fine-motor control. Then it happened. The coach assured his mother at the hospital that his word was good. Even though Jaylend couldn't play, since he had been promised a scholarship then he would be given the chance to come on to school and get that cherished degree. Only if he wished. It was his choice.

When I was being brought up, I was told basically to not "drink, swear or chew...or go with girls who do." Sadly, that was so much of what Christianity in deep southern culture had been relegated to mean. That, and the pressure to "get yourself saved so that you won't go to hell." We have a beautiful message here in the first and last verses, book-ending a laundry-list of sins and the threat of a vengeful God who simply waits to play a cosmic game of "Gotcha!" if we don't get straight.

I don't want to make light of what happens in verses 3-5 in our text today. People who truly know me -- rather than any who might simply critique me -- know that the convictions of verses 3-5 still course through my spiritual veins. Everything being equal, I'd rather we all avoid those misdeeds because I take them seriously. It's just that there is more to living apart from God than that tiny list. Offenses that didn't make Peter's list are perhaps even more serious than who drank too much last night and who slept with who. In our worst moments, there are things you or I could do that will actually hurt people and do damage to the kingdom of God.

Likewise, the grace we find in Christ is far more than getting off the hook for past licentiousness and avoiding the fires of Hell. If we read v1-2 and 6, I believe the true power of this text shines through. Because God has performed the ultimate act of grace, by giving Jesus Christ, all of us get another chance to truly live. To live as we were created to live. To live more like Christ. We ought to do so because we are grateful for God's saving acts of grace.

I bet you'd like to know what happened to young Jaylend. He left his small town and went to the big city to claim his scholarship. He fought depression, grief and a loss of identity since he couldn't be an athlete anymore. He did get to work on the sidelines with the football program instead of playing. This July, sure enough he will be the first in his family to finish a college degree. He has done an internship with a large corporation, and is contemplating a business career. He says, "Coach didn't have to keep his word. Seemed like the best thing I could do with my second chance was to make the most of it. I mean, I feel like I was left on this earth for a reason."

Prayer:

Lord of our first, second and even our thirtieth chances -- guide our hearts to hear your voice. We thank you for the grace that Jesus makes possible for our lives. Transform us, because of our gratefulness, to want to make the most of what Jesus has done for us. Amen.

May 26 - 1 Peter 4:7-11
by Dr. Charles Qualls
The End of All Things

7 The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaining. 10 Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. 11 Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Devotion:

We've got this little black cat. She's the smartest animal we've ever had, especially including the in-bred Basset Hound that our Wednesday night crowd would be acquainted with. But, this little cat is also...shall we say...high-strung. Excitable. Thankfully, the older she has gotten she has calmed down a bit. When she was a kitten, everything that moved seemed to scare her. Some things would send her into a panic.

Our joke when she especially jumped or ran from the room was, "Uh-ohhh...we're ALL gonna die!" That was the look on her face. Thus begins our reading today from 1 Peter 4. Only the way the writer there worded it was, "The end of all things is near."

We aren't precisely sure who wrote 1 Peter. Probably a close follower of his. Whoever they were, they were not alone in that stance of, "The end of all things is near." Scholars detect across Paul's letters a few hints that he believed that Christ would return in his own lifetime. There is an urgency that shows up now and then.

What does one who believes that Jesus Christ is about to return soon and resolve all of Creation recommend we do? Let's look at the list here in the passage:

- 7 Be serious and ***discipline yourselves*** for the sake of your prayers.
- 8 Above all, ***maintain constant love*** for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.
- 9 ***Be hospitable*** to one another without complaining.
- 10 Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, ***serve one another*** with whatever gift each of you has received.

Truth is, we don't know when Christ will return. That much is obvious. Christians have pretty much all believed they were living in the "end of times" for the 2,000 years since Christ ascended. Whatever century or year it was, Christians believed that surely the end was near.

Likelihood is, if the Lord tarries, we will emerge from the Covid-19 era into some clarity that life has moved on. The end has not yet come. Meanwhile, that list stares at us from 1 Peter 4. It sounds like a pretty good way for us to live in general, and especially in this limbo we occupy during the Coronavirus. Notice how they end -- "***Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.***"

Prayer:

God of all the times, including the end, hear the prayers of our hearts this day. We want to be more like Christ. Help us to take seriously the assignments like ones we find here. Amen.

May 27 - Psalm 99

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

Praise to God for His Holiness

1 The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! 2 The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is He! 4 Mighty King, lover of justice, you

have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. 5 Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is He!

6 Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. 7 He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

8 O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. 9 Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

Devotion:

What words would you use to describe God? Isaiah used the following words “wonderful, counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” The Psalmist uses similar words in Psalm 99: “king, great, exalted, awesome, holy, mighty King, and lover of justice.”

Psalm 99 is the final Psalm of a collection of enthronement Psalms (93, 95-99) and serves as a climactic Psalm. These Psalms proclaim God’s reign by offering a pre-Davidic and Mosaic perspective, reminding the reader that Moses proclaimed the reign of God before there was a Promised Land or a Temple.

The links between Psalm 99 and Exodus 15:1-8 are numerous. You may remember that the Exodus passage is the song of praise that Moses and the Israelites sang following their deliverance from Egypt. The similarities include celebratory songs that exalt God’s reign and states that God is exalted, great, awesome and mighty.

In verses 1-3, the Psalmist reflects on the sense of holiness, which is the foundational basis for God’s sovereignty. God’s sovereignty is both universal and yet focused on Zion. Jerusalem serves as the earthly presence and power of God.

Verses 4-5 indicate that the holy God is not entirely separable from human matters and places. God loves justice, because God does justice and righteousness. It is remarkable that the God of creation is intimately involved in our world. As Micah reminds us (6:6-8) justice and righteousness deal with the daily realities of human existence, especially the existence of the poor and needy. Even though God is holy, God remains involved in our world.

Verses 6-9 examine the tension between transcendence and immanence, illuminating the distinction between God who is over all and God that is directly involved with people. God has exacting standards for God’s people, yet in spite of this, God is a forgiving God. It is only by the grace of God that God’s people continue to exist.

This tension between a holy, loving and forgiving God with a God who demands obedience has long perplexed scholars. In this we find our hope, that our God, who is holy, involves God’s willingness to bear the burden of our sin.

What does this Psalm say to us in our pandemic?

1) Psalm 99 forges a new identity for God's sovereignty.

What once was understood as freedom and transcendence is being redirected toward involvement and forgiving love.

2) Psalm 99 is incarnational.

Incarnational indicates that God is involved with a particular people in a particular place in the tussle for freedom and justice. It is because of the incarnation of Jesus that Zion and the Temple were replaced. Jesus is the embodiment of ultimate redefinition of God's holiness -- God resides in human flesh! The shape of the cross demonstrates that God's sovereignty is ultimately manifested in suffering love -- while the world sees God's suffering as a sign of weakness.

3) Psalm 99 is often associated with Transfiguration Sunday.

This is because Matthew, Mark and Luke include Moses and the cloud (see Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9: 2-9 and Luke 9: 28-36). This scene is the ultimate sense of holiness; Jesus is unapproachable and the disciples are frightened because Jesus is set apart. This scene occurs just after Jesus' first announcement of his destiny to go to Jerusalem to suffer, to die and to be raised on the third day.

God is committed to being involved in our circumstances, and as such, God is committed to being with us in the struggle to enact justice and righteousness. Remember these words from the Lord's Prayer: "hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."

We are in a perplexing situation during this pandemic and we do not lack opinions.

In the final analysis, we put our trust in God, who spared not his only Son for us!

Prayer:

Holy and Loving God, remind us that you are here with us each step of our journey. Because of your incarnational love, we can face the future with faith and not fear. Amen.

May 28 - Psalm 33:12-22

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

The Greatness and Goodness of God

12 Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage. 13 The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. 14 From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth -- 15 he who fashions the

hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. 16 A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. 17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. 18 Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, 19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. 21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. 22 Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Devotion:

This Psalm begins with a statement concerning the sovereignty of God and reminds the reader that it is God who chooses a nation and not vice-versa.

God's sovereignty is highlighted with the following phrases:

- The Lord looks down from heaven.
- From God's position, God can see the inhabitants of the earth.
- God fashions the hearts of people and observes their actions.

From here, the Psalmist shares the folly of belief in human authority and rule. A king cannot be saved by his great army and a warrior cannot be saved by his great strength. Even the war horse cannot obtain victory from its great might. Even the greatest of human power is negated by God's power. The natural question that comes next is this -- if the most resilient forces known to man cannot save us, what can?

The Lord's watchful eye is on those who fear God and those who hope in God's steadfast love. As ruler over all, God alone has the ability to deliver our souls from death, even from famine. Thus salvation is God's gift to us -- not dependent on human achievement.

Psalm 33 serves as a call to humility and to trust God's limitless resources rather than our power, wisdom or virtue. The things that appear to be powerful are exposed as nothing when compared to God. All things are subject to the real power behind the universe -- namely God's love. The power behind God's love is not the enforcement of God's will, but the forgiveness of sin! As such, the ultimate power known in the universe is **love**. What is even more astonishing than that is that power is made perfect in weakness (II Corinthians 12:9).

Indeed, perfect love and perfect power are revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ!

Prayer:

God of infinite love, help us to understand that perfect love is the greatest force known to humankind. Please grant us the ability to allow your love to control our lives. Amen.