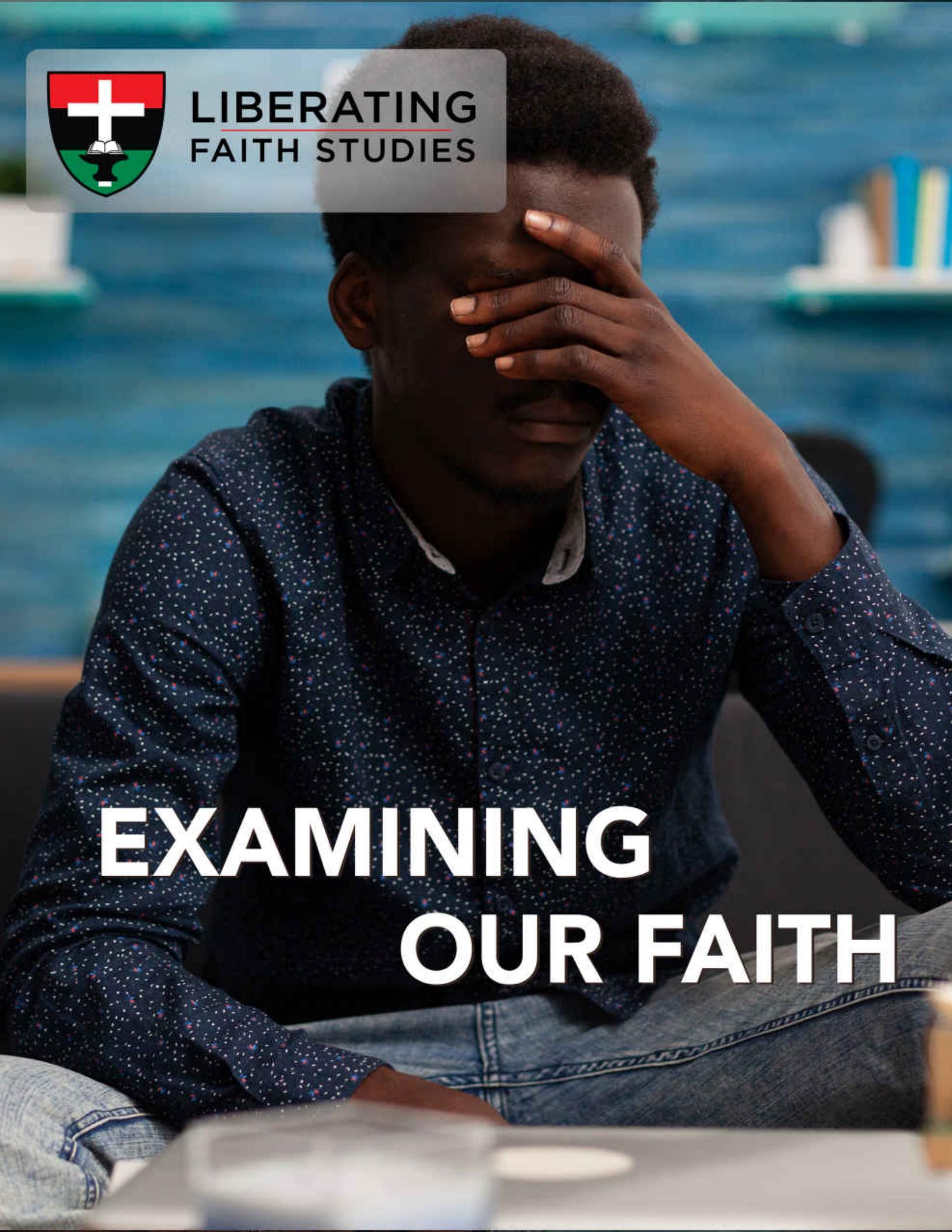




LIBERATING  
FAITH STUDIES



**EXAMINING  
OUR FAITH**

# The Order of Service

- I. Bell tap or organ voluntary as a signal for silence
- II. Singing
- III. The Apostles' Creed
- IV. Prayer, closing with the Lord's Prayer in concert
- V. Singing
- VI. Calling roll of officers and teachers
- VII. Responsive reading of the lesson text by school
- VIII. The Decalogue

## The Lesson

- I. Organ interlude while the classes are being arranged
- II. Class study of the lesson
- III. Warning bell — 5 minutes
- IV. Closing bell — silence

## The Closing

- I. Singing
- II. Review and application of the lesson
- III. Secretary's report
- IV. The Church School Creed
- V. Singing
- VI. Benediction

### Editorial Staff

Publisher • Rev. Dr. Roderick D. Belin

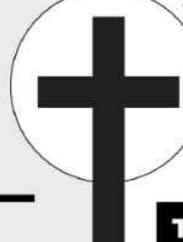
Editor • Rev. Dr. Garland F. Pierce

— Lessons —

Rev. Lionel Merritt

### The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.



### The Church School Creed

I believe my A.M.E. Church School must grow and grow; and that I must make it a top priority to make it so. Every member a Christian, every Christian a worker, every worker trained so that a worker need not be ashamed. This we ask in Jesus' name. A.M.E. Discipline

Hello, AME Church School Member!

The Home Daily Bible Readings will continue to appear at the end of each Sunday's lesson but they will be the readings for the following week. We made this change in response to your requests. The readings for the first week are below.

For over a year we have used Zoom and Facebook to facilitate our weekly Connectional Church School with teachers (lay and clergy) from around the AME Connection. They generously share their knowledge, talents, and expertise with a weekly average of 500 participants viewing via Zoom and 1500 on Facebook.

This virtual AME Connectional Church School was birthed due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The blessings from the teachings have been immeasurable. We will continue this Connectional Church School on Sundays at 9:00 a.m. EST. Join us! Zoom Meeting ID: 829 9325 1894.

Visit our website- [www.iamame.org](http://www.iamame.org)- to find worship and study resources to empower you and enhance the life of the church.

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Thank you for purchasing Liberating Faith Studies. We are working every day to fulfill our mission to provide high quality resources to empower us to spread Jesus Christ's liberating gospel, pursue justice, and enhance the social development of all people.

And, always remember, I am praying for you.

Roderick D. Belin  
President/Publisher

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

February 26–March 3

**Monday** 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (The Faith in Which We Stand)

**Tuesday** Numbers 16:12-13, 23-34 (Turn Away From the Wicked)

**Wednesday** Genesis 18:20-22; 19:1-5, 15-17, 22-25 (Flee From the Presence of Sin)

**Thursday** 1 Peter 2:13-25 (Always Do the Right Thing)

**Friday** Genesis 5:18-24 (Walk With God)

**Saturday** Jude 3-16 (Contend for the Unchanging Faith)

**Sunday** Jude 17-25 (Remain in God's Love)

LESSON 1: MARCH 3, 2024

# SUSTAINING OUR FAITH

**Lesson Scripture:** Jude

**Focus Scripture:** Jude 17-25

**Key Verse:** Beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. Jude 20-21

## JUDE 17-25 (NRSV UE)

- 17 But you, beloved, must remember the words previously spoken by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ,
- 18 for they said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.”
- 19 It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions.
- 20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;
- 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.
- 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering;
- 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.
- 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing,
- 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

## JUDE 17-25 (KJV)

- 17 But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;
- 18 How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who

should walk after their own ungodly lusts.

19 These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit.

20 But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost,

21 Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

22 And of some have compassion, making a difference:

23 And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.

24 Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

25 To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

## KEY TERMS

- **Sanctified** – Specially set apart and dedicated to the service of God.
- **Tenets** – Views, principles, beliefs.
- **Infiltration** – To gain access and push deep into the body (usually with corrupt motives).
- **Eschatological times** – The end of this world as we know it; dealing with the return of Christ.
- **Unbridled** – Without limits or restrictions.
- **Doctrine** – Core or fundamental belief or governing principle adopted to shape formal behavior or operations in a body (church).
- **Emotive** – Exciting or stirring up emotions.

## INTRODUCTION

## **On the Series**

These lessons revolve around the amazing power of faith. It is crucial to understand that faith, which empowers us to overcome frightening challenges, cannot exist in isolation. We must anchor it in a deep belief in something or someone. In these lessons, we look at the unwavering faith that stems from the character and words (scripture) of God Jehovah. We refer to people who exhibit such faith, embodying a spirit filled with deep convictions. Conversely, individuals who lack this God-centered faith we describe as faithless or lacking in faith.

### **The First Unit**

The first group of lessons (lessons 1-5) looks at five New Testament passages that show the importance of trusting in God's goodness and power. As you work through these lessons, it is crucial to remember that maintaining faith in God can be a demanding task. Every day, we can meet people who have vested interests in defying biblical life principles. And such people aggressively challenge the scriptures, its Christ, his teachings, and the values Christians hold dear. This sets up serious culture or lifestyle wars between the believers in Christian communities and the wider society. And to keep our Christian faith intact, we must be prepared to give reasonable defenses of what we believe about God, Jesus Christ, and righteous living. The teachings from the selected texts help us frame our defenses.

### **On Lesson 1**

The series starts with a fantastic call in Jude for us to fight for our faith in Christ. In the short book of Jude, we find a brilliant description of impostors who would dilute and corrupt the Christian way of life. Along with the imposter's profile, we also get a striking reminder of the foundation of the Christian faith and how we can defend it. Maybe today more than ever before, we must respond to Jude's call to action in defense of our Christian values and how these shape our response to social concerns.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

To get the full impact of Jude's message, start by noting in verse 1 to whom the letter was addressed: people who were "sanctified by God the Father and preserved in Jesus Christ and called." These were persons with grounding in the Christian faith, who could appreciate the need to follow the core principles taught by Christ and the apostles. Jude is urging committed believers to stand firm on the first principles, while warning them to stay clear of the "updated versions" of Christianity which false teachers push at them. Staying faithful to the original tenets of Christ's teaching is as much a feat of faith as killing a lion with the bare hands.

Against that background, see that Jude's warning was not original. Both Christ and the apostles had predicted this infiltration by false teachers who dress like sheep, but under the costumes are vicious wolves. This is the focus of verses 17 to 19. This warning stands for today as well. Believers must not abandon the original principles of the Christian living for "improved versions" which cater to their fleshly desires. Our focus must be

spiritual, not sensuous.

The term “last time(s)” in verse 18 gives the time frame for when the false teachers and deceivers would be most active among believers. The church has always had problems with deceivers who preach “strange doctrines.” But the “last time” push would be epic. This is the time theologians associate with eschatological times: the events that will mark the end of human history. Events at this time will signal the anticipated second coming of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, a new heaven, and a new earth.

The matters raised by Jude at places like verse 18 were major concerns of the ancient church. So, it is no surprise that verse 18 is a direct quote of 2 Peter 3:3. Apostle Peter, like Jude, was concerned about the dangers of the impact of false teachers in the church. At this point, it is useful to reflect on some traits of the false teachers.

They show signs of galloping selfishness and greed with an unbridled hunger for honor, recognition, and attention. These urges drive them to promote themselves as expert teachers who have knowledge and insights which are superior to other leaders. False teachers often promote themselves by tearing down others. We should challenge ourselves to see if we recognize persons with these traits. They are easy to spot as they will stop at nothing in their efforts to force people to see the world through their (false teacher’s) sunglasses.

Jude takes the traits of false teachers a step further and names two

features that should keep us on our guard. False teachers are notorious for the way their teachings and lifestyles blend so readily with lifestyles of the prevailing culture. If we follow their teachings, the world will have great difficulty in separating believers from non-believers.

Second, and perhaps more important, false teachers enjoy sowing confusion and stirring up divisions in the church. They rejoice when the church family is at war with itself. So, Jude's implied message is simple: run from members and/or teachers who are eager to instigate divisions in the church.

Contrast those tendencies with the character of true teachers in the church as given in verses 20-23. Faithful members and teachers focus on activities like praying and Bible study, which mature them and others in the things of Christ. They spread genuine love and kindness rather than hatred and discord. These are the people we want to associate with. Such leaders show an eagerness to follow faithfully Christ's teachings which demand genuine love for God and other people. *Look closely at the two groups Jude identified. Write lasting notes of the contrast.*

Lastly, you want to consider Jude's parting words, which entrust the believers to the care of God. This farewell greeting became famous through the ages of the church. Even today, many leaders pronounce this blessing on others with the powerful air of reverence and compassion that it evoked when Jude first gave it. To persons who receive it, the blessing still evokes a sense of peace and comfort.

## SANKOFA

The matter of contending for the faith, and Christian apologetics, people sometimes see as intellectual exercises for college students. Nothing can be further from the truth, as these are issues that can touch the lives of all of us and even become life and death matters for many. To see this, we must look at the origins of groups like the Branch Davidians of Waco Texas, Aum Shinrikyo of Japan, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda.

Based on published reports, these groups and movements started as splinters from larger groups and organizations and separated because of differences in doctrines among leading figures. We do not intend to highlight the specific activities or events of these groups, but the historical reports point to a common feature. In all groups (including churches), serious divisions on doctrine or philosophy among leaders often lead to splinters and breakaway fractions. This is the bed in which cults are born, and deadly disasters raised. Clarity and unity of doctrine are that serious.

The histories of such groups compel us to do all we can to settle disputes and divisions that arise within our churches. As followers of Christ, we must know what we believe and why we believe what we believe. This is the best defense against schisms in the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, in many churches, we are often too heavy on jargon, emotions, and cliches, and too short on understanding. That is a perfect platform for false teachers to walk in to sow discord and divisions. The

tragedy with these situations is that the cancer starts small and, because we left it unattended, grows to become fatal. Therefore, the lesson is, don't allow disagreements in the church to fester and go unattended. Arrest them early with a disposition of truth and love.

## CASE STUDY

Perhaps for many believers, one of the best-known examples of divisions within a church community, leading to a major split in the body, occurred in the Anglican Church. This was the fracture that occurred in the Anglican communion over the definition of marriage. At its core, this matter was a clash of traditional values in the church against more progressive values in the wider society.

The question at the center of the controversy was whether the church could sanction marriages of non-traditional couples, and an extension of this was whether persons in such unions were fit candidates for ordination as clergy. While any matter dealing with sexual behavior will always generate excitement, this matter was, in essence, a matter of doctrine. The key issue was, could the Anglican Church maintain its traditional definition of marriage after sectors of the wider society had moved on to more liberal definitions? Outside of all the noise and rancor, this was the heart of the matter.

Based on news media reports, certain sections of the Anglican communion stood immovable on maintaining the traditional definition of marriage. The more liberal communities could not move backward to that

ancient position. In 2003 came the straw that broke the camel's back, with the ordination of Gene Robinson, an openly gay bishop in the American district of the community. This event sparked outrage and deep divisions within the Anglican communion. Many conservative Anglican leaders and churches saw that ordination as an unwarranted and unwelcomed departure from traditional biblical teachings. In response, several conservative Anglican provinces and dioceses, particularly in Africa and Asia, broke communion with the Episcopal Church, USA and formed alternative Anglican bodies. These bodies, such as the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), were established as conservative counterparts to the more progressive-leaning Episcopal Church.

In all the excitement that this matter raised, we must not lose sight that at the core it was a theological debate about interpreting scripture. Different scholars of the communion interpreted Bible passages about sexuality and marriage differently. The views were so wide apart, no arbitration could reconcile them. The result was an incurable fracture within the global Anglican community.

It is not our place here to favor one position of the issue over the other. That is not the purpose for using this case. But this case is an example of how moral and social issues can cause major splits in a church. As the saying goes, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

## **LIFE APPLICATION**

The text draws a powerful contrast between two types of members we

find in ALL church communities: disruptors and conciliators. The disrupters love to get their own way and give no regard to the divisions and disruption they cause in the body of believers. They are selfish and bent on making their view the prevailing or dominant view. Conciliators, on the other hand, strive to keep true to Christ's teachings as they value and promote peace and fellowship among believers.

It is useful, as we consider these profiles, to reflect on our own role in the body of Christ and how we approach contentious matters. When you look at your membership in the body of Christ, are you a disruptor or a conciliator? Ask yourself what influences your opinion on an issue: scripture, public opinion, tweets, or personalities? Also, think about the value you put on fellowship in your church community. How you see yourself in a sober self-reflection will guide you in the areas you need to address to enhance your Christian maturity.

At times, when a contentious matter raises its head in the church, we wish we were in the super holy, all-loving early church where there were no problems. By now, most of us have awakened from that dream and realized no such church ever existed. Texts like Jude tell us the church always had vexing issues to address. And history will show the issues facing the church now are minor compared to the turmoil it has faced in the past.

We must confront our era's issues of abortion, marriage, sexuality, sex education, gender, racism, wealth, and politics. We cannot run from them or kick them down the road indefinitely. If we accept that position, we must

also take up our responsibility to educate ourselves on these matters. We must put ourselves in a position to understand the issues and to participate meaningfully in discussions about the issues. The proverbial “no comment” will take us only so far.

And when we take the non-committal route, we eventually become committed to the views of those people who dared to take and push a contrary position. Therefore, we must take time to frame our personal views on the hot-button issues of our day. This gives us a starting point to evaluate the different viewpoints leaders put before us.

As we grow and mature in Christ, we find new and better ways to reject evil and accommodate and promote good. Spend some time looking at the way you handle matters that are not simple. Take for example, the matter of racism. Have your views developed over the years, and can you have a reasonable discussion about race relations without becoming hysterical, abusive, or disrespectful? Of course, matters of race and racial inequalities are emotive. Nevertheless, we must be able, as members of the body of Christ, to discuss the matter in a manner that upholds our place in the Christian community. As you consider such matters, remember the promise in James 1:5, “God will give wisdom to believers who ask in faith.”

Last, let us be careful not to treat as enemies the people who hold differing views on a subject. Contrary views on certain subjects have always been and will continue to be part of normal church life. But, if you do stray and see another brother or sister as an enemy, please remember

Jesus' mandate to love our enemies.

## QUESTIONS

1. How do you find the truth about a matter when leaders put competing positions to you?
2. How far would you go to prove your point when convinced you are right?
3. Are there matters in your heart on which you would never compromise?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn:** “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” *AMEC Hymnal* #84

**Closing Prayer:** Divine maker, help me to be a peacemaker, contributing to the growth and harmony in the body of Christ. On contentious matters, keep before me that love is a distinguishing mark of genuine Christians. In Jesus' name, amen.

## HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

### March 4-March 10

**Monday** James 1:2-12 (The Testing of Faith Produces Endurance)

**Tuesday** James 1:13-18 (The Sources of Temptation)

**Wednesday** Psalm 139:1-12 (God Has Searched and Known Us)

**Thursday** Psalm 139:13-18, 23-24 (God Knows All Things)

**Friday** 2 Corinthians 11:22-33 (God's People Boast in Weakness)

**Saturday** 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (Strength Through Christ Alone)

**Sunday** 2 Corinthians 13:1-10 (Live by Christ's Power in You)

**LESSON 2: MARCH 10, 2024**

# **TESTING OUR FAITH**

**Lesson Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 13:1-11

**Focus Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 13:5-11

**Key Verse:** Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. 2 Corinthians 13:5a

## **2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-11 (NRSV UE)**

- 5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!
- 6 I hope you will find out that we have not failed.
- 7 But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.
- 8 For we cannot do anything against the truth but only for the truth.
- 9 For we rejoice when we are weak but you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may be restored.
- 10 So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.
- 11 Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Be restored; listen to my appeal; agree with one another; live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

## **2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-11 (KJV)**

- 5 Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?
- 6 But I trust that ye shall know that we are not reprobates.
- 7 Now I pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we should appear approved,

but that ye should do that which is honest, though we be as reprobates.

8 For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.

9 For we are glad, when we are weak, and ye are strong: and this also we wish, even your perfection.

10 Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the power which the Lord hath given me to edification, and not to destruction.

11 Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

## KEY TERMS

- **Parochial** – Relating to the local (parish) church.
- **Gossiper** – A person given to spreading gossip (rumors).
- **Tenets** – Key principles and beliefs.
- **Salacious** – Exciting or arousing lust or desire.
- **Pious** – Religious and self-righteous.
- **Malignant** – Growing / expanding and deadly (disease).
- **Unwittingly** – Innocently and ignorantly.

## INTRODUCTION

This is one of those lessons which spins tightly on, and swings sharply from, the **Key Verse**. “Examine yourself” is one of the most disturbing phrases some people can hear. Those folks would rather climb to the top of Mount Everest or swim to the floor of the ocean before they can entertain those most piercing words. Yet, in that phrase lies a most powerful tool for spiritual and emotional maturity.

Naturally, it is so easy to examine, analyze, and criticize other people. And a few smart gossips make the examination and criticism of others a fine art. But we are reluctant to examine ourselves, because to do so may suggest that we are not as perfect as our Facebook and Twitter profiles suggest.

Usually, to entertain examining ourselves is to suggest to ourselves we have faults and, at times, fall back into bad habits, and may even be guilty of cherished sins. That admission can be painful. Yet this was exactly what Apostle Paul was asking the church at Corinth to do. And it is advice we should embrace every so often. Yes, there is great wisdom in examining ourselves against the tenets of our Christian faith. And where we see faults and/or weaknesses, we must take steps to address them.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

At verse 7 of the text, Paul dances with a point that is at the heart of faith in God and his words (the scriptures). We show our faith in God and the scriptures by one sure way only: by obeying and doing what the scripture commands. Jesus took time to teach this in places like John 14:15-24. The same principle 1 John 5:3 reinforces. We can make many claims of loving Christ, but until we are walking in the prescribed lifestyles, we are just making noise.

That is the reason self-examination is such a vital exercise in the walk of faith. But also note that as Paul posed the question in the **Key Verse** (original Greek), it is a rhetorical question phrased to suggest that Paul

expected a positive response. He expected the church members to know that as Christians in good standing, Christ was in them, giving them victory over the urge to sin. The only way this would not be true is if they had disqualified themselves by not walking in the lifestyle commanded in scripture. (Those who support the once-saved-always-saved doctrine may find this approach challenging).

In the **Introduction**, we touched on examining ourselves versus the normal appetite to examine others. In the text, a bit of both is at play. Paul was obviously not at the Corinthian Church but was acting on reports about sinful behaviors in the church.

However, he found himself in a situation where he had to justify his authority to enforce discipline. This he was trying to do, while making the point that his primary concern was not the authority to discipline, but the purity and maturity of the church. The references Paul made to himself were evidence of two things. First, as an apostle of Christ, he had the authority. Second, he had examined himself and concluded he was in good standing by virtue of the life he lived.

See verses 7-9 against that background. Paul wanted the members to act righteously, but feared they would see his lack of discipline as a sign of weakness. Slowly, but deliberately, consider this situation. There was evidence of sinful behavior in the church, see 1 Corinthians 6 and 2 Corinthians 12. Rather than take steps to address the mess, members were more focused on whether Paul had the authority and inner strength to

enforce discipline on them. This is a situation that is so familiar and hauntingly painful.

Now, let us put it all in a neat context. Paul wrote both Corinthian letters to address behavioral issues in the church, so he could focus on building a loving and faithful community when he was at Corinth. If you cannot appreciate this at first glance, consider some issues members try to raise at the yearly Annual Conference and/or the General Conference. Those parochial issues could have been effectively resolved at the quarterly meetings. So often, we are left to wonder if the attempts to raise local matters at the district or Connectional levels are truly sincere efforts to find solutions. Still, as was the case with the church at Corinth, we must reject the lure to assume ulterior motives and hidden agendas.

## **SANKOFA**

In the preceding sections, we noted that it is useful to examine ourselves periodically. One reason we should do this is because spreading false rumors or unfounded reports about individuals is unchristian and can tarnish people's reputations. We can unwittingly share unfounded allegations which can tarnish or destroy the ministries or careers of others. Therefore, even when sharing "jokes" we must exercise a degree of caution. We can share some hard cases of the pain believers brought on others by carelessly sharing "jokes." Consider this situation about an innocent pastor, wrongly accused.

On the "Restoring Kingdom Builders" website, we find a blog about a

pastor who was maliciously accused of wrongdoing. The poor brother was placed on a humiliating paid leave to allow for an external independent investigation. In two weeks, the investigators found the charges were baseless, and the pastor reinstated. According to the report, “When he re-entered the pulpit, the congregation gave him a standing ovation.” Persons interested in reading the full blog can go to: <https://blog.restoringkingdombuilders.org/tag/false-accusations-against-a-pastor-false-accusers-in-the-church/>.

When we hinted at the end of the **Telling the Bible Story** section that we should resist the assumption of ulterior motives and hidden agendas, we meant it. Yet, truth be told, that is not always easy or wise to do. As the blog correctly noted, at times these unfortunate situations happen because nothing is done about the people making unsavory accusations. Sometimes the instigators just move from church to church, spilling their venom. And too often we make life easy for them because we refuse to examine the salacious stories, or examine ourselves, before we share them. Kindly note that the spreading of unfounded allegations is not consistent with the Christian faith. Proverbs 6:16-19, 10:18, 19:16, and 20:19, Leviticus 19:16, Psalm 34:13, 1 Timothy 3:11 and 4:7 are useful references in this regard.

## CASE STUDY

The power and usefulness of examining ourselves is not just a “Christian thing” we do to show how pious we are. Secular mental health professionals also promote self-examination. In a *Psychology Today* posting on October

26, 2018, Michael Austin, Ph.D. gave useful insights on the practice of self-examination in “The Lost Practice of Self-Examination.”

A quote that appeared within the article noted: “Nothing will make us so charitable and tender to the faults of others, as, by self-examination, thoroughly to know our own – Francois Fenelon.”

And here is a passage from Dr. Austin’s posting: “Self-examination is one of many spiritual practices present across many wisdom traditions that we would do well to implement in our own lives. In a discussion of this practice, contemporary philosopher James Gould says that self-examination is the ‘regular monitoring and assessment of our own moral progress.’”

Need we say more?

Perhaps all that we have left to say is the Bible makes many powerful calls to us to practice self-examination. Here are eight of them we should study within the context of the chapters in which they occur.

1. 1 Corinthians 11:28

2. Job 13:23

3. 2 Corinthians 13:5

4. Psalm 4:4

5. Psalm 77:6

6. Lamentations 3:40

7. 1 Corinthians 11:31

8. Galatians 6:4

The wisdom in those verses, if we catch it, will transform the way we see the world and others, because it will revamp the way we see ourselves.

## LIFE APPLICATION

As noted at the start, self-examination is the rope on which this lesson swings. It is therefore no surprise that we open the **Life Application** section with a call for meaningful self-examination. Set a convenient time during the week and reflect on your faith walk. During this quiet time, reflect on how well you are maturing as a Christian. Compare your views on the crucial aspect of the Christian faith. Are you convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that God exists, created all that is in the world, created humans, and is owed the worship and adoration of the people he created?

Then, in the same session or a related session, examine yourself concerning Jesus Christ. Is Jesus the perfect expression of God, who came to this world in the flesh, died for our sins, was resurrected, and now sits on the right hand of God making intercessions for us? Did Christ send the Holy Spirit to help us live the Christian life? And here is the \$60,000 question: does the Holy Spirit, God's own spirit, live in imperfect, comparatively weak, sin-prone humans after they accept Christ as Lord and Savior? How can something so holy live in a vessel so unholy? This is not a trick-question. Ponder it and answer.

Maybe you will be tempted to think that the above personal inquiries step outside the lesson. They do not, because unless you are firmly settled on the fundamentals of the Christian's faith, you have no proper yardstick to assess

your faith walk. Assuming you are settled on the core issues, assess your relationship with others. Can you love your enemies, forgive people who hurt you 490 times (Matthew 18:21-22), and entertain needy people as Jesus specified in Matthew 25:35-40? These assessments should not scare us. Rather, they will help us to objectively see areas in our lives we need to seek God's help to strengthen.

Self-reflection and the insight it brings are crucial for another reason. We must know ourselves and be honest with and about ourselves before we can be effective witnesses for Christ. People have a third eye that easily spots pretenders. You cannot effectively represent God in an area of life where you are beggarly. Consider the woman at the well in John 4. She had less than a stellar past. Yet she was able to represent Christ to others because she accepted her sordid past and spoke of what she knew of Christ. To witness for Christ effectively, we must first understand ourselves, and that understanding comes through honest self-examination.

Oh yes, we cannot skip around it. Self-examination can be humbling and disturbing, as it forces us to face uncomfortable situations we prefer to leave hidden in our past. Yet, it remains one of the most powerful tools for healing hurts from our past, assessing our strengths and weaknesses, and promoting growth in Christian virtues. And it gets better the more we do it honestly.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why does self-examination seem so hard even when we do it within the

privacy of our own homes and thoughts?

2. Can our own eagerness to examine and criticize others be a clever device to not face our own shortcomings?
3. How does a healthy self-examination differ from a negative witch-hunt to condemn and bemoan our past mistakes?

### **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” *AMEC Hymnal* #53

**Closing Prayer:** Dear Father, help me to see myself as you see me: low enough to know I need your mercy and grace to make it through this life and into eternity, yet high enough to know I can be lifted up to do anything you call me to do, despite my human weaknesses. Lord, I thank you for life. In Jesus’ name, amen.

### **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

#### **March 11-March 17**

**Monday** 2 Timothy 4:1-8 (Proclaim God’s Message at All Times)

**Tuesday** Psalm 67 (Let All the People Praise God)

**Wednesday** Mark 5:1-2, 6-7, 11-20 (Proclaim What Jesus Has Done)

**Thursday** Acts 9:10-22 (A Powerful Defense of the Faith)

**Friday** Isaiah 1:16-20 (Come, Let Us Argue It Out)

**Saturday** 1 Peter 2:4-12 (Live Honorably Among Unbelievers)

**Sunday** 1 Peter 3:8-17 (Be Ready to Speak for Christ)

LESSON 3: MARCH 17, 2024

# DEFENDING OUR FAITH

**Lesson Scripture:** 1 Peter 3:8-17

**Focus Scripture:** 1 Peter 3:8-17

**Key Verse:** It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. 1 Peter 3:17

## 1 PETER 3:8-17 (NRSV UE)

- 8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.
- 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.
- 10 For “Those who desire to love life and to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit;
- 11 let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it.
- 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”
- 13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?
- 14 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
- 15 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,
- 16 yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.
- 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

## 1 PETER 3:8-17 (KJV)

8 Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous:

9 Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.

10 For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:

11 Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it.

12 For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.

13 And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?

14 But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled;

15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:

16 Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

17 For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.

## KEY TERMS

- **Paradox** – An apparent contradiction; opposing idea in the same thought.
- **Proverbial** – Like what is said in a well-known saying (proverb).
- **Sanctify** – To place in a special (separated) position of worship and adoration.
- **Linchpin (Lynchpin)** – The essential factor on which something works. The heart of an argument or position.

- **Expository** – Designed to explain (or expose) the meanings of scripture.

## INTRODUCTION

If for any reason you missed the devotional reading of 2 Timothy 4:1-8 or simply glossed over it, you have robbed yourself greatly. For in it are golden nuggets of truth all genuine Christian believers must subscribe to. Traditionally, we read this passage as part of the Apostle Paul's instructions to a junior minister. While that is true, the instructions and exhortations are for all believers.

Jesus' direct parallel teaching in the Gospels is John chapters 15 and 16. These passages (Timothy and John) set out in dynamic living colors the lot of the genuine believer. It is a life of paradox. On the left hand are struggles, rejections, and sufferings, while on the right we have power, peace, and glory. This is what we sign on for.

But we all know that often this is not the representation given on popular religious shows. Sadly, we usually hear of the Christian life that is filled only with mansions, exotic cars, overflowing bank accounts, and thrilling vacations in fantasy destinations. Is some of this possible? Oh, yes indeed! Nevertheless, always remember, if we are truly standing for Christ, the world that hated Christ cannot love us. Every day we will face a choice. We can choose to be like Timothy and take the advice to endure affliction, or we can be like Demas (2 Timothy 4:10) whose love for "this present world" overrode his desire for ministry. The choice is like Sprite soda, clear. We

stand, identify with Christ, and defend our faith; or we chicken out and conform to the world.

## **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

One gripping feature of the scriptures is the powerful way in which scripture confirms and proves scripture. We see a great example of this with verses 8 and verses 10-12 of the lesson text. The virtues listed in verse 3:8 sit in sweet harmony with the *Fruit of the Spirit* of Galatians 5:22-23. In like fashion, verses 10-12 echo Psalm 34:12-16. In essence, these scriptures call us to embrace the character of God in our hearts first, so that this godly character will naturally flow out of us in our dealings with other people.

In verse 9, Peter noted that we are called to be blessings by virtue of our relationship with God through acceptance of Jesus Christ. This is interesting because we get blessings by inheritance, rather than as rewards for our works. Yet, we will only get the blessings if our faith endures to the end. Therefore, the hope of blessings is the inspiring and motivating factor that drives us to endure.

We understand this as we see it play out every four years at the Summer Olympic Games. The hope of representing their country before the world, and earning a gold medal, motivates athletes for four years to wake up early, train hard, eat right, and reject many of the pleasures and comforts of normal living.

The elite athletes push their bodies through multiple pain barriers, endure grueling training schedules, and even isolate themselves. They do all these

things hoping to step onto the winners' podium. They know they can only get the medal and winner's glory if they endure the training and complete the event.

The same must be the mindset of the Christian. The promise of blessings must motivate us to push through all hardships and sufferings in defense of our faith to cross the proverbial finish line. To use the football analogy, we cannot drop the ball, neither can we let the enemy get it from us. Like Deion Sanders, we must run with our faith securely held in one hand, using the other hand to block and push away opponents.

In the text, verse 13 asks a question which, with verse 14, sets up the tension the Christian must deal with. Why will people want to harm us if we do good to others? Normally, we would rush to say no one would, and in many cases that would be true. But recall what happened to Jesus when he healed a man on the Sabbath. The religious leaders were offended and vowed to kill him. The same thing happened to Peter and John in Acts 3 (and 4) when they healed the lame man by the temple gate. For their good deed, they were arrested, imprisoned, and threatened with punishment.

The remaining verses of the text (verses 15-17) frame the mindset we must adopt when our Christian good brings us scorn and persecution. We look and appeal to God, the *Ultimate Judge*, the *Author and Finisher* of our faith. In trying times, we remind ourselves that although we may have to suffer for a while, there awaits us crowns of glory, if we do not faint and throw in the proverbial towel.

And yes, we go beyond merely enduring sufferings. We boldly, yet respectfully, tell others of the hope that sustains us, and the God that provides for and covers us. We stand our ground, proclaim our faith, and praise our God. That is the striking portrait of a genuine Christian.

Finally, note the call from verse 15 to sanctify the Lord in the heart. The idea of the heart in this context goes beyond the seat of the emotions definition normally given this word. See the heart as the source of will and decision-making. To sanctify Jesus in the heart, “therefore” means making the character and teachings of Christ the hub, the main determining factor, of all we desire and do. We do not fit Christ into our desires and decisions; rather, Christ becomes our desire and decisions. Think about this deeply. It can take some time to seep into our consciousness.

## **SANKOFA**

At times when we hear of people suffering to defend their faith, we can offer only intellectual sympathy. Fortunately, our vision of suffering for our faith can stop people taking our parking space in the church’s parking lot. Maybe we suffer when someone forgets to put our name on the church program, or when another member makes non-flattering comments about our clothes or hairstyle.

But in many quarters of the globe, persecution for faith convictions is more consequential. Pastor Evan Mawarire of Zimbabwe is an example of someone who stood to defend his faith convictions and suffered harsh consequences. Pastor Evan Mawarire became known in Zimbabwe for his

activism and criticism of the government for its unchristian policies. As a Christian pastor, he made good use of social media platforms to mobilize citizens against corruption, economic hardships, and human rights abuses. In 2016, he was arrested and charged with inciting public violence and subverting the government.

He had to make several court appearances to defend himself against the charges, and drew a loud chorus of support locally, regionally, and internationally. This support paid off, as he was eventually acquitted. But he was not deterred. After the acquittal, he continued the work of an advocate for positive change in Zimbabwe. His convictions about justice and fair play in society were that strong. Such is the power of the Christian faith working in us for the good of society.

### **CASE STUDY**

The matter of standing in defense of our faith is a complex affair. On the right hand, the Bible is packed with stories of people who stood for God, relied on their faith, and God came through for them with amazing power. We know and love those inspiring stories about David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, the three Hebrew boys, Peter's jailbreak in Acts 12, and the release of Paul and Silas in Acts 16. This is the positive, uplifting side. And if these were the only stories in the Bible, more believers would stand proudly in defense of their faith.

The problem comes because, on the left hand, the Bible also has the death of Stephen and the beheading of John the Baptist. These horror stories warn

us that standing in defense of our faith is risky, indeed deadly. So, many believers step back or walk lightly when opponents challenge them on matters of faith. This realization prompted us to ask what the common traits are in people who are willing to stand in defense of their faith, even in the face of credible death threats. Incidentally, we found the martyr's characteristics are the same irrespective of the cause, whether religious, social, or political.

The primary feature is a deep, enduring belief (conviction). Such people hold unshakable views, which become their subjective reality, and this perceived reality can override the usual reasoning, standard logic, and objective reality. People of conviction see and interpret truth against the backdrop of their convictions. What aligns with their convictions is truth and what does not they reject, irrespective of its source.

People with the martyr character attach themselves to their perceived reality. They become part of their perceived reality and so their existence becomes worthwhile only in terms of their vision of their cause. And here is the crucial linchpin. Because the person becomes part of the cause he or she represents, to attack or take away this cause (mission) is seen as a personal attack. They cannot distinguish between the mission and themselves.

We see this clearly in some of the writings of Apostle Paul, where he identifies himself with the cause of representing Christ to the Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, Paul has so closely identified himself with the working of God's spirit, he said it was not he who was doing what he did, but God's

grace at work. Note likewise his declaration at Philippians 1:21-26. He was indifferent about his life, as he saw both life and death only in terms of his calling by Christ.

And in terms of his vision of the truth of the (his) Gospel, see Galatians chapter 1 notably verses 6-10. Not even an angel (who is made a little higher than humans) could bring another true version of the Gospel. That is pure conviction. That is certainty. That is his reality. That is the voice of a man who would die in defense of his (sure) faith.

### **LIFE APPLICATION**

Most genuine believers want to defend their faith and, to varying degrees, do indeed defend it at times. Still, there are church members who know their faith is not strong and run smartly from any challenge of their faith. Silently, they admire the people who can stand publicly and defend their faith in Christ, wishing and hoping that someday they too will be able to do the same. This section is devoted to them.

How do they get to the maturity in faith where they feel comfortable defending it? The first step is to realize that no one gets to that stage overnight. Let us read Galatians chapter 1 again. Note that Paul was sure from where his commission as an apostle came: from Christ and not from any earthly person or group. That is our starting point. Where did your call to be a believer come from and who sustains that call? If it is a denomination, you can grow no further than the denomination allows you. But if it is from Christ, you develop as you allow Christ to grow in you. So,

ponder this and be clear about it.

Next, be real about your development. Again, look to Galatians. Paul traced his development over time. He did not get to rock-solid faith in one flash. Even the fastest sport car in the world takes time to move from zero to 60 mph. Study the Galatians' passage from verse 12 onwards and walk with Paul as he traced his history. Underscore the time factor (three years) and the rejection and the other events he suffered along the way.

Try to feel what Paul felt along the way. Force yourself into his thoughts during the development process. And do one more thing. Stop listening to the fantasy stories of some televangelist, especially the ones who make Christian maturity seem to happen like how we reheat chicken in a microwave oven. We have no 30-second maturity faith button to press. The TV faith giants who go from weaklings one morning to superheroes by noon only exist in TV land. For most believers, mature faith comes out of a process that takes time. Do not take the TV fantasies seriously. If you do, they will frustrate you and make you belittle yourself when you do not see the amazing fantasy growth in yourself.

Also, saturate your mind with the things of your faith. No person develops strong faith, or a strong defense for their faith, on a "Sunday Morning Service Only" diet. We must read good literature about our Christian faith. Attend and take part in lectures, seminars, workshops, and expository Bible studies. And whenever you get an opportunity, discuss your faith in friendly groups and listen and learn from others who are more

mature.

Support those activities with a decent prayer and meditation life. Take to heart James 1:5 that God gives wisdom to those who ask for it sincerely. Ask God to help you understand the scripture you read. And finally, tell others about Jesus Christ.

Start small! Do it one-on-one in friendly situations and don't argue, just share. When you are asked something and you are not sure, ADMIT you are not sure, research it, and give the person your best answer later. You will find as you do this, you will grow by leaps and bounds. And if you keep at it, soon you will be defending your faith in higher and higher levels. Eventually, you will get to the point where you are not afraid to take on anyone when it comes to defending your faith. Ask me how I know.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What does Galatians chapter one teach us about setting a firm base for our faith?
2. What is the relationship between being sure about our faith and sharing our faith?
3. Can good Christians be secret agents for Christ, operating under the public radar?

## **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *AMEC Hymnal* #54

**Closing Prayer:** Dear Father, like every person you created, I wish I could

always have good, happy times in my life. But I accept life is a series of struggles and at times painful. Yet I rejoice knowing that in those tough times, you are right there with me. Thanks for your presence, thanks for your power, thanks for your peace. Amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

### **March 18-March 24**

**Monday** Deuteronomy 28:1-14 (Blessings of Walking in God's Ways)

**Tuesday** Titus 2:1-8 (Let Your Life Match Your Words)

**Wednesday** Proverbs 1:1-9 (Fear God and Gain Knowledge)

**Thursday** 2 Corinthians 5:1-11 (Refrain From Defiling the Church)

**Friday** 2 Timothy 2:8-21 (Vessels Prepared for Every Good Work)

**Saturday** Acts 6:1-6 (The Ministry of Caring for Others)

**Sunday** Acts 6:7-15 (A Spirit-Empowered Witness)

### **LESSON 4: MARCH 24, 2024**

## **LIVING IN FAITH**

**Lesson Scripture:** Acts 6

**Focus Scripture:** Acts 6:7-15

**Key Verses:** (Some) stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Acts 6:9-10

### **ACTS 6:7-15 (NRSV UE)**

7 The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

8 Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen.

10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

11 Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”

12 They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council.

13 They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law,

14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.”

15 And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

#### ACTS 6:7-15 (KJV)

7 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15 And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

## KEY TERMS

- **Sedition** – An act of treason; an attempt to attack or overthrow the government.
- **Chronological** – Giving event details in the order they occurred.
- **Uganda** – A country in eastern Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

The **Lesson Scripture** text has all the elements of the real-life challenges Christians face around the world, and we would do well to mark these features. Government officials may, from time to time, view the Gospel message and Christian ministry as acts of sedition and rebellion. When this happens, Christians find themselves before the law courts, or otherwise persecuted for doing nothing more than sharing the love of Jesus Christ. The events surrounding the execution of Stephen gave a graphic reminder of the risks of Christian ministry.

Yet, what is most troubling about Stephen's execution is that religious leaders and their zealots, who had missed the train of truth, triggered it. We can only wonder how often history has repeated itself in this regard. Likewise, what do we do when, as believers, we face the situation that

confronted Stephen?

## TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Verse 7 of the text highlights a feature of Luke's writing style: summary statements to show the prevailing conditions or the results of certain actions. Verse 12:24 gives another example of this. This reminds us that the Acts does not give a full chronological report of all that was happening in the early church. Some verses are just summaries.

To understand why the religious elite of Stephen's day felt offended and threatened by the Christian faith movement, we must follow the growth of Christ's followers. The group started with 120 members in Acts 1:15 and grew to over 8,000 by Acts 2:41 and 4:4. The movement was not only popular among ordinary people but attracted priests and other influential people. This had to be a source of concern for the traditional religious leaders.

We do not have to venture far outside the text to understand why the traditional leaders were eager to destroy Stephen. From the text, we know he was of moral character, and a deacon chosen to address the physical needs of the vulnerable in the church (6:1-6). This would have given him a level of leadership and influence.

Further, Stephen's skill in teaching and debate shamed educated, honored synagogue members (6:9-10). Therefore, to regain their reputation and save face, these men first tried to destroy Stephen's credibility. After this, it was a natural step to move to destroy him physically.

But why were Stephen's words so biting? First, the Jews saw his commentary as a direct attack on the most sacred institutions of the Jewish faith, the temple and the law. God originally sanctioned both. However, over time, man's practices had corrupted both (hence Jesus' rage about the temple practices). Still, the Jews tied their righteousness to their ability to observe outwardly the temple rituals and the law (or their corruption of the

law). And so, an attack on the temple and the law was an attack on the faith and righteousness of the Jews individually and the Jewish nation collectively. That attack would have drawn blood from their hearts and taken the color out of their faces. What happened then was an expression of that hot, murderous rage.

Stephen paid the ultimate price for standing for his faith. He suffered for doing good; a living enactment of 1 Peter 3:14. Yet, was that all to the story? Where was the glory of living for God? Oh yes, there was glory! During the ordeal, God encouraged Stephen and strengthened his resolve by giving Stephen a powerful, more profound, experience of God. By standing firm on his faith in the face of death, Stephen got a glimpse of the spiritual reality that awaited him, a view reserved for the selected chosen few. To appreciate this, compare Acts 6:15 and 7:55-56 with Hebrews 11:1. Most of us get to speak gloriously about faith, but never see the glory of faith in this life. Stephen saw the glory and assurance of faith. He won glory by losing his earthly life. He won!

Stephen's victory is a victory for every believer who lives in faith. Faith does not guarantee us any particular outcome. It assures us of glory, and the certainty of the object of our faith. We cannot lose.

## **SANKOFA**

To Christians in Uganda, the life and death of Janani Luwum (1922-1977) is proof we have modern-day Stephens. Janani Luwum was an archbishop of the Church of Uganda (Anglican). He was an influential figure in Uganda during the presidency of Idi Amin, the president famous for accusations of brutal atrocities. Our reports say Luwum openly criticized Amin's government for its human rights violations as he advocated for the

justice and freedom suggested in the Christian faith.

That advocating led to his arrest on charges of treason that most people regarded as false. This is very similar to the false accusations that came against Stephen. Despite the international outcry and appeals for his release, Luwum died “accidentally” in a “vehicle crash” while in custody. Details of Luwum’s life are in a Wikipedia posting under his name.

Like Stephen, Janani Luwum is celebrated after his sacrifice. Since 2015, Uganda celebrates a public holiday on 16 February, to remember the life of Janani Luwum, a modern-day Stephen.

## CASE STUDY

The Gospel, the teachings and message of Jesus Christ, can sometimes awaken strong negative emotions and reactions in people. It is important to accept that these reactions can vary greatly. An individual’s reactions to the Gospel depend on the individual’s core beliefs, cultural background, and personal life experiences. Let us look at five of the primary reasons people may respond with anger to the Gospel message.

**Contrary religious differences.** The Gospel is primarily linked to Christianity, and when we share it in a way that suggests Christianity is superior to other religions, it angers people who support other faith views. Christian evangelists must be conscious of this when they engage strangers. While we must never compromise on the core values, we must show respect for the beliefs of others. There is a thin line between respect and compromise, and we must learn how to walk on that line.

**The challenge to change.** In times past, evangelists made a serious mistake, which some Christians still make today. They over-emphasized the changes which people must make to become a true Christian. This can anger people and run them away from the Christian commitment. The truth is this. When people make a genuine commitment to follow Christ and open their hearts to the transforming power of the Gospel, changes of character and behavior occur. Sometimes, the transformation is rapid; at other times, it is more gradual. We must not try to do the work of the Holy Spirit to expand church membership lists.

**Judgmental sentiment.** Unintentionally, at times in our evangelistic outreach, we talk down to people in tones that say, “I am better than you because I am a church member, and you are not. If you want to be great like me, you must become a Christian like me.” Nobody likes people who put them down. The initial undertones people draw from our words may hurt our efforts to share the Gospel. So, we must be careful in how we pitch our evangelism invitations. We would do ourselves a great favor by studying how Jesus made his pitch to Matthew, Nicodemus, and the woman at the well. The Lord also taught there is only one who is good, God the Father.

**The historical and cultural links of Christianity.** It is true that the history of Christianity has some dark spots. And some detractors cannot stomach anything linked to Christianity because of its historic associations to Emperor Constantine, the religious wars (crusades), slavery, and race discrimination.

Dealing with this can be tricky. The best defense is a three-step process. First, fall back on the noble aims of Christianity. Second, admit the historical atrocities, but point out these were outflows from the evil of the human heart that were not sanctioned by God. Then, cite the many advances in these matters that came from, or with the cooperation of, people who had the right view of the Christian heart. For example, people in the front row of the fight to abolish slavery had deep Christian affiliations. The Civil Rights Acts came from the bellies of people like Dr. Martin L. King, a Christian minister. There are hundreds of positive examples we can draw on. Do not run from the negative historical associations. Admit that in all human activity, we find the good, the bad, and the ugly.

**The Gospel's cutting edge.** Last, understand the Gospel message is like a surgeon's scalpel to the phony public profile of some people. It can strip away in one stroke the artificial images people spent years constructing. This can be painful. Once more, we recommend going back to Jesus in John 4 with the woman at the well. She tried to protect her self-image with the bland, "I have no husband." Jesus' immediate response was, "You have said well, 'I have no husband.'" He had set up the platform for the truth confrontation and stepped into the door she opened. Study the example and learn to use it.

Notwithstanding all we said, the Gospel is foolishness to dying sinners and will pull out raw emotions at times. We can only try, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to be tactful in our evangelism outreach.

## LIFE APPLICATION

The word “suffering” stirs hurtful emotions. No person likes to suffer or see others suffering. (Maybe we make exceptions for the suffering of political and religious enemies.) Yet suffering is often in God’s toolbox for promoting maturity in believers. This is a good point to consider if you have ever suffered for Christ, by thinking on what you learned from those experiences.

For this exercise, discount the sufferings which resulted from poor decisions, greed, or outright disobedience and rebellion. Focus on the sufferings that came because of your stance for truth or righteousness. Although it can be uncomfortable, revisit the experiences and find the maturity God gave you through the suffering. From your experiences, what can you say about God’s character and the ministry of the Holy Spirit? Are you now in a stronger position to do ministry for the Lord? If you can say yes to such questions, be grateful for the suffering.

Although it was not one of his greatest fights, Mohammed Ali’s fight against Chuck Wepner is one that boxing fans cherish. As expected, Ali won the fight in a 15-round TKO. So why do we remember the fight? It was one of the rare occasions when Ali hit the canvass. He went down. Yes, the knockdown was controversial, but history records it as a knockdown. Ali went down, but he could not stay down. Too much was at stake: his reputation, \$1.6 million, and the WBA and WBC champion belts. Ali definitely could not stay down on the canvass.

This is the attitude genuine Christians have about their faith walk. Yes, sometimes life and situations will punch us hard and put us on our backs. But like Ali, we must remember our mission and refuse to settle for a consolation prize. \$100,000 is not enough when you left home to collect \$1.6 million.

And consider that Ali was fighting for an earthly crown, something he had to give up, eventually. We, on the other hand, are fighting for an eternal crown that we never have to give back. Let the thoughts of Ali's comeback be our inspiration to get back up from suffering when God allows it. Remember, the prize is for the person who endures to the end.

We read the stories of people like Janani Luwum in the **Sankofa** and applaud his courage. Yet sometimes we allow minor discomforts and inconveniences to knock us off the path of faith. In those times, we should meditate on God's words to Jeremiah at Jeremiah 12:5, "If racing against mere men makes you tired, how will you race against horses? If you stumble and fall on open ground, what will you do in the thickets near the Jordan?" Or, as we often say, the race is not for the swift, but for the person who endures (suffering) to the end. Happy Palm Sunday! We celebrate knowing Good Friday is coming.

## QUESTIONS

1. Do you have an idea of how much suffering you are willing to endure for the Gospel?
2. What do you turn to for comfort in times of suffering?

3. As Christians, can we avoid suffering for the Gospel message by being smart in how we practice our Christianity?

## **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian,” *AMEC Hymnal* #282

**Closing Prayer:** Dear Father, suffering is scary. Help me to act wisely and avoid it where I can. But when you allow it, remind me of your comforting presence and the crown of glory I will get by enduring to the end. This is my prayer, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

### **March 25–March 31**

**Monday** Mark 14:1-9 (Faith Revealed Through Extravagant Love)

**Tuesday** Exodus 14:10-20 (Faith in God’s Deliverance)

**Wednesday** Exodus 14:21-31 (Faith in God’s Protection)

**Thursday** Mark 14:17-26 (Faith Challenged and Encouraged)

**Friday** Mark 15:25-39 (An Unexpected Confession of Faith)

**Saturday** Psalm 22:1-11, 28-31 (Faith Despite Pain and Loss)

**Sunday** Mark 16:1-8 (Faith in the Risen Christ)

**LESSON 5: MARCH 31, 2024**

# **THE RESURRECTION: KEY TO FAITH**

**Lesson Scripture:** Mark 16

## **Focus Scripture:** Mark 16:1-8

**Key Verse:** “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” Mark 16:6

### **MARK 16:1-8 (NRSV UE)**

- 1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.
- 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.
- 3 They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”
- 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.
- 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.
- 6 But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.
- 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”
- 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

### **MARK 16:1-8 (KJV)**

- 1 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him.
- 2 And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.
- 3 And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?
- 4 And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great.
- 5 And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right

side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted.

6 And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him.

7 But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.

8 And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.

## KEY TERMS

- **Reclusive** – Avoiding the company of other people; solitary, or lonely.
- **Meager** – Small and not enough for the purpose.
- **Supposition** – Something we suppose; a theory not proven.
- **Detractors** – People who deny or try to weaken your position.
- **Hallucination** – Illusion, something not real (but imagined).

## INTRODUCTION

If you have the wealth and influence Howard Hughes had and want to have more surety and security of your affairs, maybe you can live as a recluse as Mr. Hughes did at one point in his life. But even in his reclusive world, and with all his wealth, Mr. Hughes could not control everything in his environment or his affairs. He was still exposed to certain risks and uncertainties. Risks and blind spots are just a normal part of life. And incidentally, it is this reality that gives birth to our worries.

If people like Howard Hughes, with their vast wealth and influence, could not take the risks and uncertainty out of living, ordinary people with meager resources cannot hope to take the uncertainty out of living. Therefore, the question that arises is how believers facing uncertainty and the ordinary risks of life should do so. Do believers and non-believers employ the same strategies to deal with the uncertainties of living? And further still, does our faith give us an advantage in facing the blind corners of life? That is the focus of this lesson.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

In some respects, what was happening with Jesus' body after his crucifixion was unusual. Normally, the anointing of the body (with burial spices (16:1)) would take place before the burial. However, in Jesus' case, the Sabbath began before Jesus' disciples could care for his body or even place it in the tomb (see Mark 15:42; Deuteronomy 21:23; Matthew 27:59-60). This set up the early morning visit of 16:2.

The question the three women asked at 16:3 highlights a quality that should be part of the lives of believers. First, they were determined to do what they felt their relationship to Jesus demanded of them. They were so focused on what they felt was their duty, they had given no thought to the method of doing the job before they started the journey to the tomb. In some respects, this was an expression of faith. They knew they had a job to do, and they set about doing it.

Please note, they did not call a committee meeting to debate what had to

be done or should be done. Action was required, and they acted. Also observe, the Bible gives no comment on who was the leader of the group, so, the next time we fail to act because we could not get a perfect committee report, or settle questions of leadership, we should remember these women.

Verse 16:4 opens a glass door that is a feature of the actions of faith. At verse 3, when the women realized they had no answer to their question about the stone, they could have stopped or turned back. Not these women! They kept going. They went to the tomb and found the stone was already moved. There is a lesson here.

Believers often fail in projects and their duty to God because they focus on the size of the stone. They let the fear of failure stop them in their tracks and they never reach the tomb to see that God has already made provision to move the stone. We will never know how to deal with the stone by debating it in a committee meeting. We must go to the tomb and look at the stone. As we look at the stone, God will give insight on how to move it, if God does not move it Godself. That is how people of faith should act.

In verses 5-6, we meet an angel (Mark's version). The story ceases to have meaning if we do not believe in the supernatural world of angels. Reading the rest of the chapter is useless if we discount the existence and operation of angels. As a matter of fact, the whole Bible is just a sad fable if we do not believe in angels. We cannot explain the miraculous birth and work of Christ, or the birth and work of John the Baptist, outside the existence of angels.

Still, in verse 6, we see the women were afraid, or as Mark puts it, they were shocked or deeply alarmed. Some commentators and readers, for their own purpose, try to give these women some extraordinary faith and insight, which the text does not give them. They were as shocked at the turn of events as we today would be. There is absolutely no evidence to support that these women expected to see a risen Jesus. Like everyone else, they expected a dead, stiff body. No one at that time believed Jesus' messages that he would be murdered and rise again in three days.

But what the story of the women shows is the amazing things we can experience when we dare to move in faith. Sometimes we wait for every "i" to be dotted perfectly and every "t" to be crossed before we are willing to move. And get this, we know more today, and have more in the scriptures than these women had. We have more commentaries and expert opinions than they had. Yet, so often we are slower to move and slower still to act in faith.

Maybe, just maybe, that is the reason we do not see the wonders of God displayed in our times as we desire. Please understand verses like James 4:8, Psalm 119:2, and Jeremiah 29:13 put the onus on us to make the first move towards God. We must do like these women and move in faith towards our stones, despite our trembling and fears, if we are to see the amazing glory of God.

## **SANKOFA**

It is customary in these discussions to see faith in narrow religious terms

rooted in service to God. We will step out of that mindset and look at faith in a wider context involving service to the community. Our case of focus is that of William Kamkwamba, at 14 years old, in the African country of Malawi.

We start with the observation that, according to the World Bank, Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with about 70% of the population living below the poverty line. At a time when water and food were extremely scarce, young William was concerned about the survival of his community. And he decided to do something about the situation.

What was William's big tombstone? He had no engineering background; he had no money; and, he had no materials with which to work. But his concern was deep. So, against the odds, he got scrap materials, taught himself the fundamentals of making a windmill and basic electricity, and set about to make something that would help to get water in the community. He succeeded. His country benefited from his invention of windmills and an apparatus that brought water and electric power to the community. Because of his inventions, his fame exploded on the international scene. You can watch his TED TALK on YouTube.

The large stone in front of the tomb comes in various forms. At times, like William, we do not know how or where to start moving those hindering rocks. But like the women in Mark 15, and William in Malawi, the key to success is to start and do not stop.

## CASE STUDY

We have many ways to describe the importance of the resurrection narrative to Christianity. One is to say Jesus' resurrection story is the power that keeps the Christian jet flying. Take away the resurrection story and Christianity crashes immediately into a mountain of intellectualism. Without the resurrection narrative, all the post-crucifixion texts in the Bible become fables, and as Apostle Paul put it, Christians of all people become most pitiful.

For years, it has been a favorite plot of haters of Christianity to challenge Christians to prove the facts surrounding the resurrection. And in desperation, young Christians have scrambled to shout the standard defenses. Ronald, a first year Bible school student, did something amazing that stopped a friend who challenged him on the subject.

He turned the challenge on its head. "No, Chester," Ronald said, "You disprove it!" It was a brilliant tactic. For centuries, no sceptic succeeded in shaking the resurrection narrative. Every doubting theory advanced asked us to believe suppositions and events beyond the credibility gaps. For example, it is easier to believe the resurrection account in the Bible, than to believe that the disciples slipped pass the professional guards to steal Jesus' body. And sceptics cannot explain why no person ever found the body.

Further, what about the argument that Jesus did not die physically? What a shame that is on the reputation of professional executioners who killed for a living. If sceptics ask us to believe that Jesus survived the cruelty of the cross, and the trauma of a spear ripping into his body, we can accept that.

Believing that ridiculous alternative requires more faith than what we need to believe in the resurrection story. This death survival theory still must explain how the injured Jesus got out of the tomb and got past the elite guards.

The problem with this alternative survival theory is it gives Jesus more power in this situation than the original resurrection story. Hence, we need more faith to believe it than we need to believe the traditional story. What a dismal attempt to shake faith in Jesus' bodily resurrection.

Still, there is a more fundamental bridge the opponents of Christianity must cross. The vital question is, "Do you accept the Bible as the inspired word of God?" To the person who answers in the negative, no one can prove anything. In that person's mind, Jesus was not born as we say, and he is not the Son of God, or the Savior of the world. A Jesus who did not exist cannot be crucified and resurrected. A person who rejects the entire *Book* cannot accept something that comes from the *Book*.

Another brilliant way to defend belief in the resurrection story is to accept that detractors do not believe it. Then ask them what they believe about human life and the afterlife. You will find many of them believe what psychologists like Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner believed. They say humans are just like any other animal, mere creatures of instinct. Immediately, you will recognize that such creatures do not need a Savior, whether dead or alive. That is at the heart of their fight with the resurrection story.

In summary, all credible research shows that it is an advanced form of insanity to believe you can force intellectual skeptics to accept the resurrection narrative. The reality is, such people have no quarrel with the resurrection story in itself. Their objections spring from deeper, more fundamental confusion about humans, God, the Bible, and the human need for a savior. Thus, if you must engage in such debates, do not waste time with the traditional arguments. Drive to the opponent's core position on human life, the existence of God, and the relationship between the two. If you cannot crack through the fundamentals, you cannot crack the objection to the resurrection of Christ. But hold to your beliefs about God's love for us as expressed in a resurrected savior.

## **LIFE APPLICATION**

The three women in Mark 16 saw the glorious work of God because they pushed themselves to do what they accepted was required of them. They acted even though they did not have all the answers. Can we follow that example? Is there something you are confident God has called you to do, but you do not have all the answers on how to move forward? If you do, keep moving as the women did, even when there are dark spots and unanswered questions.

In this regard, meditate on Ecclesiastes 11:4: "Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest." Our faith is measured by the fruit, not the discussion of fruit.

Any solid lesson on the resurrection of Jesus prompts two questions. The

first is to what extent each person buys into the details of the resurrection of Christ. Someone once told a class the resurrection story is like a pregnancy: a woman is pregnant, or she is not. No woman can be partly pregnant. Similarly, either Jesus Christ, the savior of humankind, came to earth as a man, died, was buried, and rose again, or he did not. It is that plain. It is that simple. Therefore, challenge yourself to answer this question: “Do you believe the Gospel resurrection story, angels, empty tomb, and all the surrounding details?” This is vitally important because if you are not firm in your beliefs, your beliefs will not stand when attacked.

The second consideration is, can you share those beliefs in a reasonable, calm, but impressive tone? Hold your breath for this. If you can, you are in a minority. If you cannot, do not be dismayed. This is your precious opportunity to call on your pastor or a trusted, mature Christian for help. Request or organize a Bible study on the defense of the resurrection. And don’t forget Ronald’s approach. Rather than you trying to prove it, ask the opponents to disprove it.

If you take that approach, learn the weaknesses of the detractors’ arguments. Their arguments are versions of old arguments and theories: Lack of Historical Verification, the Hallucination Argument, Stolen Body Argument, the Swoon Theory, and Legend Theories. Be familiar with these if you are serious about defending the resurrection story. Remember, all the objections sit on a more substantial basis. And you must upset the foundation to collapse the attack on the resurrection story.

But do all that tomorrow. Today, just join in jubilant praises for the risen savior. A blessed and joyous Easter to you.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the most challenging thing to accept about the resurrection story?
2. Why did no one (the three women and disciples included) expect Jesus' resurrection even though he predicted it at many places in the Gospel?
3. How different would our Easter celebrations be if the merchants (retailers) did not use Easter week as a major sales opportunity?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn:** "He Arose," *AMEC Hymnal* #170

**Closing Prayer:** Loving creator, grant me the wisdom to understand the revealed mysteries of your almighty power, and the faith to accept those things which are beyond my maturity. You are my God, Jesus my Savior; and, I rejoice that I can celebrate the resurrection of my Lord. This is my prayer of thanksgiving, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

### April 1-April 7

**Monday** John 1:37-42 (Come and See)

**Tuesday** Jeremiah 17:12-17 (Heal Me, and I'll Be Healed)

**Wednesday** John 4:4-18 (Jesus Provides Living Water)

**Thursday** John 4:19-29, 39-42 (Worship God in Spirit and Truth)

**Friday** Psalm 66:1-5, 13-20 (Tell What God Has Done)

**Saturday** Isaiah 6:1-8 (Here Am I; Send Me)

**Sunday** Luke 5:17-26 (Jesus Heals and Forgives)

LESSON 6: APRIL 7, 2024

# FAITH OF FOUR FRIENDS

**Lesson Scripture:** Luke 5:17-26

**Focus Scripture:** Luke 5:17-26

**Key Verses:** Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but, finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down on the stretcher through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. Luke 5:18-19

## LUKE 5:17-26 (NRSV UE)

17 One day while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem were sitting nearby, and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

18 Just then some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus,

19 but, finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down on the stretcher through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.

20 When he saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

21 Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

22 When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?

23 Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?

24 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the one who was paralyzed—“I say to you, stand up and take your stretcher and go to your home.”

25 Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.

26 Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, “We have seen incredible things today.”

### LUKE 5:17-26 (KJV)

17 And it came to pass on a certain day, as he was teaching, that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by, which were come out of every town of Galilee, and Judæa, and Jerusalem: and the power of the Lord was present to heal them.

18 And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before him.

19 And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the house top, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus.

20 And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee.

21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?

22 But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts?

23 Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk?

24 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house.

25 And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.

26 And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, We have seen strange things to day.

### KEY TERMS

- **Corporate Faith** – The faith expression of a group.
- **Benign** – Not growing or spreading.
- **Instinctively** – Occurring as a matter of instinct or impulse.

## INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 22:36, Jesus taught that all the commandments and religious rules come down to two essentials: loving God and loving others. In Philippians 2:3-5, Apostle Paul gave more insight on how the second great commandment applies. Believers should have no doubt that their treatment of people in need opens or closes access to God. This is clear with any casual reading of Matthew 25:37-40.

In this lesson, we look at how friends can help a friend in need to access both material (physical) and spiritual blessings. As we start the study, consider your close friends and the extent to which they would go to help you. And to complete the circle of thought, think of the people who call you friend. Then ask yourself to what extent you would go to help them. Does God really expect us to tear off the proverbial roof to help other people in need? Is the case in the text a special event which God does not expect us to repeat?

During the discussion, take for granted that Jesus knew what he was teaching when he implied that we instinctively love ourselves, and look after our interests first. Unfortunately, by making that assumption, we discard “the excusing lotion” immature believers may use to sooth their conscience, when they fail to help persons in dire need. The “excusing lotion” holds that some people in need do not love themselves, and hence cannot receive our love, even if we offer it. But experts in human behavior tell us, on good authority, when we see people making “stupid decisions”

they are still taking the best self-interest option they can see.

Further, observe that the text does not discuss how the man got into the helpless position. This is another wall believers may hide behind to justify not helping needy people. Maybe the text is silent to force us to see the needs of our friends, rather than discuss how they got into the beggarly situation.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

Come to the text knowing the writer Luke was a physician, and, therefore, had a special interest in the healing miracles of Jesus. So, see the story of the man with paralysis and his friends as part of a series Luke presents to demonstrate Jesus fulfilling Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:16-21) in both the physical and spiritual realms. In Luke's writings, Jesus is the total healer who heals damaged and broken bodies and spirits. Any sober reading of Mark's *Great Commission* confirms the church is called to carry on the mission of restoring both physical and spiritual healing. Luke's other book (Acts) similarly spotlights restorations of body and spirit.

Normally, we speak of faith as it relates to the faith of individuals like Abraham and King David. But in this and similar texts, we see corporate faith at work. The faith of the four caring friends put the paralyzed man in front of Jesus, and that corporate faith moved Jesus to give the man a total healing (in both soul and body).

To see the two corners of corporate faith, compare the events and outcomes of Matthew 9:27-30 with those of Mark 9:14-21. Like most things

in life, corporate faith can work towards positive outcomes or hinder them. It matters where and with whom we worship.

The vision of four friends ripping open a house roof to get their friend in front of Jesus seems truly dramatic and wildly impressive. And it was. Yet, maybe, not to the extent of the mental images we paint using the roofs of modern houses.

The roofs of houses at that time in Palestine were flat, usually made of clay mixed with straw, and supported by beams and branches of trees. They were like the adobe (or Pueblo) style houses in the southwest USA. Therefore, removing a roof in those days did not require the effort and tools such a task would require today. Still, it was a bold move and a massive show of faith by the friends.

We can all agree the friends' actions were a thrilling demonstration of faith. No doubt about that. Still, those steps were much more than faith. They were steps of the highest form of love in action. This is the love that steps beyond a mere emotional expression in words, to the taking of unselfish actions for the good of another. This is the love that lifts us over deterring obstacles to help persons in need. The friends could have stopped behind the crowd and said, "Brother, we would love to get you before Jesus; but look at the crowd. Sorry, brother, we will try another time when the crowd is not this thick."

But maybe those four friends knew Romans 12:9-16 and 1 Corinthians 13. And in line with those scripture passages, the friends said instead, "Bro,

love finds a way. You are going in front of Jesus today. Wait here a minute, while we make your door through the roof.”

Verses 25 and 26 put in focus for us the primary object of a godly act of faith: the glory of God. Naturally, we recognize the contribution of the people involved in the event. Without doubt, we praise the brave action they took and put their names on the screen during the notices. But nothing should hide the glory of God that the faith act spotlights. And spotlighting the glory of God goes beyond spending the whole notice period praising people and ending with a benign, “To God be the glory.” The spotlight must shine brightest on God, not on us.

## SANKOFA

In the text, the friends were close in the normal terms we use for friendship. But please do not let that fact block your view of how some “good Samaritans” help friends using the wider global definition of Luke 10:29-37. On February 3, 2019, as part of a Black History Month feature, NBC Los Angeles told the story of Richard Reed. The story is heart-gripping. Reed, a former homeless man himself, established a charity to help homeless people get off the street and back on their feet. The Charity, First To Serve (FTS), is not your normal charity which just gives people a meal and a cover over their heads. FTS helps the homeless with life skills, job preparation tasks, and the services they need to get off the street and get back into living with dignity.

*The Richard Reed, First to Serve story is the story of the text on a*

community basis. It brings to life the 2 Corinthians 1:4 idea that God comforts us in our time of trouble so we can comfort others when they need comforting. In this life, we will never have all we want. Even billionaires reach for more. So, we should not promise to help people when we are “in position to.” Every day we meet people who are in a worse position than us. Let us make it a point to rip off the roofs of our hearts and help them. We never know when we will need help.

### **CASE STUDY**

Maybe, like us, you noticed some people appear eager to help needy people. They are ready to go into action at the start of any charity event. And you can call on them any day of the week to give a helping hand. On the flip side of the coin, we find people who use twisted reasoning and excuses to avoid helping people in need. Persons in this group are always “too busy” doing nothing or have nothing to give. If a community charity program is announced, these folks do not even pay attention. This observation prompted us to ask, “What are the characteristics of ‘Helpers?’” Apparently, Lissa Rankin, M.D. asked that same question in an article posted June 24, 2014, under the title, “What Drives You to Help Others?”

The posting threw out ideas we can use to evaluate our willingness to help people who are down on their luck. We do not intend to reproduce the article here or analyze all its reasoning. Rather, we want to highlight three assessment ideas that flow from the article. You will notice a degree of overlapping in the three basic traits we look at here.

First is the personal fulfillment and self-identity factor. The author floats the idea that some people connect their self-worth to the help they give to others. Whether this is so or not is debatable. But if you get a boost of positive vibes when you help people, you are likely to be a natural helper. Natural helpers are happy to help people in need, and they do not look for rewards or special mention from the platform. Their sole reward is knowing they did something pleasing to God.

The innate impulse to serve is another element we must consider. Dr. Rankin leaned to the position that each of us feels a natural impulse to help other living beings to get out of suffering. In other words, it is not humane to enjoy or tolerate the suffering of people. Instinctively, humans want to stop or ease the suffering of others.

We can argue that people, for various reasons, learn to ignore or override this impulse, if in fact we agree there is one. Give this some thought. Does the suffering of others “do something to you” or can you simply ignore the suffering of others and sleep well at night? Perhaps this is the natural impulse that filled Jesus with compassion for sick, hurting, and lost people. How strong is this impulse in you?

Third is the yearning to serve. Some people will volunteer and serve in certain roles. For example, we have ladies in ministry that will jump to serve in any capacity in any ministry dealing with children. This is great and we embrace those sisters.

Yet at times, we meet people who get an intense high-wire thrill from

serving others. The persons in need may be children, older adults, the homeless, drug addicts, or drunkards. It matters not to these “natural servers.” Admittedly, we do not see many of them in any congregation or group, but they exist, and they are serious and happy to serve others. Even when we do not honor their contributions, these servers keep serving. Do you know any of them?

Consider to what extent you can identify these traits in yourself and in others with whom you must work.

### **LIFE APPLICATION**

Above, we urged you to consider how much of the “helper’s” characteristics you see in yourself. Please be kind in doing the assessment. Know that these features grow in a believer’s life with time. No brother or sister goes to sleep one night without them and awakens the next morning searching for homeless people to rescue. In religious jargon, you will recognize we are talking about the *Fruit of the Spirit*.

Therefore, if you see it is lacking in your life, make it a point of prayer and meditation. Yes, you may see an orchard of fruit in some people. We are not all the same, and God grants spiritual gifts to people in varying degrees. So, you may not see an orchard in yourself. But be concerned if you cannot find at least one apple tree in yourself.

The text shows an aspect of the willingness to help that we must bear in mind. Helping others is a demanding and often risky business. We know of a paramedic who loved to help people in medical crises. She was on duty in

an ambulance, responding to a call for help from a victim of a shooting. While she was assisting the victim, the culprit returned to finish the victim and the paramedic lost her life in the reckless shooting. Thankfully, such cases are rare. However, to help people sometimes means we must put our own comfort and safety at risk. For this reason, it is advisable to work in groups when seeking to help others. We employ this approach, especially when assisting persons or communities with which we are not familiar.

At the start of this next application, we say, “To misuse is to abuse.” A few people use the “Pray About It” advice as a device to avoid helping needy people. With gleeful tones, we tell people in need if they give their problems to Jesus, he will fix them. Who can argue against that? But when people use such statements as a device to slide out of the opportunity to assist people in need, they anger God.

Still, leading people to a relationship with Christ and helping them to seek God in prayer is one of the most powerful and blessed ways to help people in need. When we give drowning people hope, we lift them above the raging waters that seek to overflow them. This is one of the reasons the Richard Reed charity (in the **Sankofa**) became so effective.

Of course, when dealing with needy people, do all you can within reason to address their physical needs. In addition, take equal time to awaken hope in them. Follow the story of the four friends in this vital aspect. In the text, the friends took the paralyzed man to Jesus for a physical healing. He got spiritual healing as a bonus. Do the same for the people whose physical

needs you seek to address. Give them Christ as a bonus. And never use the offer to prayer as a device to run from helping people.

## QUESTIONS

1. What type of obligations do Christians have to help others?
2. Would it have improved our understanding of the text if the reason for the man's paralysis was given?
3. Why is the Richard Reed story (**Sankofa**) not seen more often?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn:** "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," *AMEC Hymnal* #323

**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, I know I have not always risen to the opportunity to help others. I side-stepped people I could have helped. Please, Lord, help me to do better as I continue my walk of faith. This I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

## HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

### April 8-April 14

**Monday** Acts 10:1-15 (Accept What God Has Made Clean)

**Tuesday** Isaiah 42:1-12 (God's Servant Enlightens the Nations)

**Wednesday** Malachi 1:10-14 (God Is Praised Among the Nations)

**Thursday** Colossians 3:1-11 (Christ Is All and in All)

**Friday** Zechariah 8:18-23 (Nations Shall Entreat God's Favor)

**Saturday** Luke 3:1-14 (All Flesh Shall See God's Salvation)

**Sunday** Luke 7:1-10 (Jesus Helps a Righteous Gentile)

LESSON 7: APRIL 14, 2024

# FAITH OF A CENTURION

**Lesson Scripture:** Luke 7:1-10

**Focus Scripture:** Luke 7:1-10

**Key Verse:** (The centurion said), “I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” Luke 7:7

## LUKE 7:1-10 (NRSV UE)

- 1 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.
- 2 A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly and who was ill and close to death.
- 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.
- 4 When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him,
- 5 for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.”
- 6 And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof;
- 7 therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.
- 8 For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.”
- 9 When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”
- 10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

## LUKE 7:1-10 (KJV)

- 1 Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum.
- 2 And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die.
- 3 And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant.
- 4 And when they came to Jesus, they besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this:
- 5 For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.
- 6 Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof:
- 7 Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.
- 8 For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.
- 9 When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.
- 10 And they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant whole that had been sick.

## KEY TERMS

- **Capernaum** – A village in Galilee; Jesus' hometown.
- **Commendation** – A high level of praise, usually recognized by an award.
- **Presumption** – To assume or form an opinion from related facts.
- **Resounding** – To hear repeated like an echo.

- **Status Quo** – Things as they are or appear to be.
- **Purveyors** – The pushers, spreaders, or promoters of something, usually evil.

## INTRODUCTION

The text of this lesson (Luke 7) says so much. A non-Jew military officer recognized Jesus had the authority to perform a personal miracle for him. And he held this view, even though in his own mind, according to the prevailing religious thinking, he knew he was not worthy of Jesus' presence. Even Bible scholars can miss this super gigantic point. This Gentile soldier had a positive faith-view of Jesus' authority, alongside a negative faith-view of his own religious standing with Jesus. The army officer could not have known then that he was displaying the cornerstone of the pure Christian faith-view.

We, as unworthy sinners with nothing to make us worthy of Jesus' presence and power, can still receive from God, because God almighty's authority can reach us and work for us, despite our unworthiness. You might have heard the principle expressed in this way. The same power of God we recognize as capable of working miracles for us qualifies us for the miracles.

Take your time to get accustomed to this overriding floor principle of the Christian faith. It is easy to miss it in all the noise about what we must do (to qualify ourselves) to gain favors from God. If ever you feel you are

unworthy of Jesus' presence and/or favor, ask yourself what the centurion did to get Jesus' highest faith award, the *Oscar* of faith. Do the same.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

Luke was careful to point out that this sterling display of faith happened at Capernaum. To get the significance of this, quickly read Matthew 13:58 and Mark 5:4-13. Capernaum was the place where the unbelief of people restricted the miracle-working hands of Jesus. Yet in this community of unbelief, Jesus recognized the greatest display of pure faith. What does this say to us? It says the quality and extent of our personal faith does not have to be at the same level as the faith community to which we belong. Our personal knowledge and experiences of Christ can push our faith in the Savior miles ahead of the general faith level of the people around us. Christ deals with us on a personal, individual basis, not on a group or organizational basis.

From the events in Luke chapter 4 and related scripture, it is safe to hold the view that the centurion was familiar with Jesus and his ministry. This put into focus another key plank of faith. We must ground faith in something firm and objective. Faith in a person or thing does not just spring up overnight out of thin air. This is the reason reading and studying the scriptures is of vital importance. Sadly, today, we hear and see an increasing amount of preaching where opinion and catchphrases are replacing scripture text. This is worrisome. Opinions are a dime a dozen on a weekday, and at half price on Sunday.

Opinions can be useful. Their only drawback is they are subjective, fleeting, and hence only relevant for a short time. Therefore, they are a poor footing for our faith. Scripture, on the other hand, is objective, enduring, and has proven itself over centuries. Bible texts give us the best foundation on which to pin our faith.

To get maximum impact from the text, contrast verses 3-5 with verses 6-7 and see them in today's context. This army officer understood and respected the Jewish religion. Hence, he made his approach to Jesus through the Jewish religious dignitaries. He followed the protocol.

In addition, he was well-known and had given lavishly to the Jewish society. Few people could give a whole church to a society. He did not just say he loved the Jewish community. He demonstrated his love. Yet he felt unworthy of Jesus' presence. Isn't this amazing? After playing by the rules and doing so much, how could he still feel unworthy? In our society, would someone in his position not feel "entitled" to God's favor?

But look at the outcome! Jesus, by granting the favor, dismissed the man's opinion of his worthiness. Jesus' actions and commendation said the man was worthy. This speaks volumes of wisdom to us. When we compare ourselves with others, or against man-made rules of religion, it is likely we will form the wrong opinion of where we are in Christ. So, we must compare ourselves not with how well we keep the trappings of religion, but how well we keep the commandments of God, and God's view of us.

And truth be told, as Jesus pointed out in Mark 10:18 (and 1 Samuel 2:2),

despite our position in church or society, our material wealth, our political views, or party affiliation, no one has standing with God outside God's mercy and grace. Therefore, as a general rule, do not see yourself as less worthy than another brother or sister. Always see, available to you, the same grace and favor which enables others to stand and petition God. Our challenge is to do as the centurion did. He did not seek to qualify himself. Instead, he reached out to God and let the authority of God qualify him. This he did in a community where faith in Christ was sadly lacking.

The text also addresses a famous catch-22 debate about faith and action. What is the relationship between faith and works? Can we say we have faith, and yet have nothing (no actions) to show for this faith we claim to have? We know this debate from James 2:17- 26. The centurion acted on what he believed: he called on the elders to get Jesus.

The Bible clearly states that God gives each person a measure of faith. Granted, some people have a large tablespoon measure, while others have a small teaspoon measure. But we all have a measure. Here is the crucial idea to catch. A person gets more faith by using the faith he or she already has. Active faith builds on active faith. David had the faith to face Goliath because he had used his faith to face off with a lion and a bear. The story of the centurion says, use whatever faith you have towards the outcome you desire.

Lastly, although we urge you to take action based on your faith, you must act with humility. Taking action to "show off" your faith is not acting in

humility. Faith does not order God to do our will. That is not faith, but prideful presumption. On the contrary, faith brings us to the place where we try to find the will of God in a situation, and then doing what God demands to submit ourselves to that will. Faith always places God's authority above our ability and opinion.

## **SANKOFA**

If you want to meet someone outside the Bible who displayed faith in action, a shining example is George Liele (c. 1750-1828) from Georgia, USA. He grew up in slavery, and according to the reports, converted to Christianity when he was around 23 years old. Shortly after, he set up one of the first black churches in South Carolina.

By acting on his faith, Liele bought land and built his first church in Kingston. By 1814, despite the many obstacles he met, this man of faith had established five more churches throughout Jamaica, with an estimated following exceeding 8,000, an amazing accomplishment in that era.

Still, he showed his amazing faith in another way. Unlike many other church planters, Liele did not demand money from his churches. He worked unpaid, supporting his wife and four children with his private transport business. But that was not all.

Beside normal church ministry, Liele took on the daunting task of educating the slave population in Jamaica. He established schools around his churches. Brother Liele died in 1828 and his body was buried somewhere (not certain) in Kingston, the capital of Jamaica.

To appreciate the faith that propelled Liele and people like him, consider his modern counterpart. Liele started as a slave, had nothing to start ministry, took on an enormous debt to get a start in life, and yet built at least five churches with schools, when money, resources, and opportunities were virtually non-existent for men like him. Today we see people with much education, access to resources, and multiple platforms, not achieving one-tenth of what George Liele achieved in Jamaica. Faith in action, rather than in talk, explains the difference.

## CASE STUDY

Christian believers have a strong desire to walk in faith. So, it is useful to look at factors which enable us to put our faith into action, like the George Liele's of this world. The actions of Esther, in the book by her name, give valuable insights on this matter. Although authors cut the key principles into many bit-size pieces, there are only four real considerations.

**The Cause!** Esther had a cause she believed in. The welfare of her people was her primary concern. It was not a thirst for money, prestige, or fame. Esther could have played the situation selfishly and looked out for her own good, as many officials oftentimes do. But she could not take the easy way out, because as she saw it, she was a Jew, and the plight of the Jews was on the line. Making herself comfortable and leaving the Jews to fend for themselves was therefore not an option on the table. She had to get involved in the struggle to save her people.

**Acceptance of Risks.** The resounding words in Esther 4:16, “If I perish, I perish,” showed Esther knew and accepted the risks in the actions the Jews had planned. This was a sharp departure from what we see in some leaders today. Not a few modern religious and political leaders insulate themselves

from the risks of the cause. They organize risky events from the safety of guarded homes and fortified offices and send ordinary people to bear all the risks of the cause. This is the reason the leadership of people like Senator John Lewis is so honored. He took the risks with the people. Senator Lewis followed Esther's example: he knew the risks of the demonstrations and took those risks with the people.

**Integrity of Character.** Notice also, the point about risks gives us the foothold we need to see the third factor. When people stand for righteousness or justice, opponents with vested interest in the status quo use two devices to shoot down the calls for fairness. The first is naked violence. It is a simple strategy: if we cut off the head, the body will die. You have your own examples of where leaders of liberation movements suffered brutality and death.

The second tactic, which is often used first, is to "buyout" or "buyoff" the leaders of the movement for justice. So, leaders get offers of cash and other lavish gifts from the purveyors of the oppression. And we also have our examples of public outcries that rose loudly and then went silent under flimsy excuses. Every leader who achieved significant results for a cause had to face and reject these calls to "sellout" the cause.

At your leisure, research the life and legacy of Dr. Martin L. King, President Nelson Mandela, Alexander Bustamante in Jamaica, and Bussa and the uprisings in Barbados. Only persons with steel in their character can walk away from the lavish inducements opponents offered to corrupt their stance for God or a righteous cause.

**Passion!** Although we hinted at it, we must highlight the role of passion. The prophet Jeremiah felt the Word of God like a fire shut up in his bones. He had to act. He had to get it out, and even though he was preaching for decades without seeing meaningful results, he could not stop. That is a feature of faith in action. People of genuine faith are people on fire for their cause. They cannot sit still and watch as injustice or ungodliness gobble up

a people or a community. Normal people can do that. People with a burning cause and heart-felt passion cannot.

## LIFE APPLICATION

Jesus saw many displays of faith during his earthly ministry, but he gave the centurion's faith special commendation. Why was this and how does it relate to us? If you ask most believers if Jesus is a healer, without hesitation, they will say most definitely. And all of us will agree in one long chorus.

Now let us ask the question in a personal manner. Can Jesus heal your incurable disease (hypertension or kidney disease) which you had for a decade? Before your answer, consider that most medical staff say such diseases are incurable and the only option is to manage the disease with medication. Now to the answer. Most believers will offer evasive answers to the second question. They squeeze into their answers other factors like the will of God, so they do not have to give a definitive answer.

Immediately, we see the beauty of the centurion's position. He saw Jesus had the power (authority) to heal generally, and that Jesus would use that power for his servant's benefit. The centurion set up no escape route to hide in just in case Jesus did not come through.

Therefore, you can ask yourself for yourself, "What am I sure God has the power to do and will use to answer my prayer requests?" The centurion saw God's great power as available to him and was sure God would use it for him when he asked. He allowed his faith to box him into a corner. Can you exercise that level of faith? Think about it.

Assuming you can answer with a firm "yes" to the consideration above, what are you going to do about your situation? The centurion, from his conviction that Jesus would heal the servant, sent to call Jesus. He took action. We must follow through likewise. So, consider what action you are prepared to take to display your faith in God's solution. As pointed out in

the sections above, this is the true hallmark of faith: the action people take in line with what they believe. The right action depends on your circumstances and what is right for you. Esther went to the king under the risk of death. In prayer, put your situation to God and seek his guidance on what action is right for you.

Further, the lesson prompts us to ask if our faith is growing or stagnant. Mature faith takes time to develop, so don't kick yourself too hard if your faith seems smaller than other people's. The key consideration is whether you are seeing in yourself a growing faith.

Take some time (maybe a week) and look back over your faith walk. Do you see signs that your faith has grown? Are you today more confident about God, his love for you, and his willingness to put his almighty power to work for you? Are you now more willing to step out in faith, even when such steps make you look awkward or downright silly?

Lastly, the centurion story provides a perfect blend of faith and humility, or the humility that should be in our faith. The officer was confident that Jesus would give a positive response to his request. Yet he knew he had to respect Jesus' status as one having exceptional authority. He owed Jesus a devotional respect.

Against that background, consider if you are truly humble in your approach to God. Jesus suggested this humility in The Lord's Prayer. In the opening lines of that prayer guide (Matthew 6:9-13), we position ourselves as inferior to God, giving God's will and kingdom pride of place in our lives. We live to do God's will, rather than God existing to do our will. Consider this when you pray and make any adjustments you deem necessary.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. Does this text support the doctrine which states we can name and claim

anything we want from God?

2. Why did the centurion think he was unworthy of Jesus coming into his house? Did it have anything to do with the house?
3. How did the man's understanding of authority frame his faith in calling on Jesus?

### **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** "How Great Thou Art," *AMEC Hymnal* #68

**Closing Prayer:** Dear God, lead me in a deeper understanding of your love for me, and how I can live in that love. This I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

#### **April 15-April 21**

**Monday** Luke 7:11-18 (Jesus' Compassion for the Grieving)

**Tuesday** Psalm 92 (Sing Praises to God's Name)

**Wednesday** James 5:12-20 (Confession, Prayer, and Healing)

**Thursday** Micah 7:7-20 (God Pardons Iniquity and Transgression)

**Friday** Psalm 86:1-7, 11-17 (God Is Good and Forgiving)

**Saturday** Romans 8:1-16 (No Condemnation in Christ)

**Sunday** Luke 7:36-50 (Jesus Forgives a Sinner)

LESSON 8: APRIL 21, 2024

# FAITH OF A WOMAN WHO LOVED JESUS

**Lesson Scripture:** Luke 7:36-50

**Focus Scripture:** Luke 7:36-50

**Key Verse:** (Jesus), said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Luke 7:50

**Luke 7:36-39, 44-50 (NRSV UE)**

**Luke 7:36-39**

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee’s house he reclined to dine.

37 And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.”

**44-50**

44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.

46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little.”

48 Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

50 But he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

**Luke 7:36-39, 44-50 (KJV)**

**Luke 7:36-39**

36 And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat.

37 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,

38 And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

39 Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

**44-50**

44 And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

45 Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

46 My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

48 And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

49 And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?

50 And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.

## KEY TERMS

- **Screenwriters** – People who write stories and speeches for plays and movies.
- **Intriguing** – Exciting (especially to our curiosity).
- **Conjecture** – Not a fact, but an estimate or opinion.
- **Contrition** – Deep sorrow, especially for sin.
- **Hospitality** – Being kind and generous to guests or people we host.
- **Peripheral** – Not the main or most important; extra or side-show.

## INTRODUCTION

If ever a screenwriter wants a Bible story to make into a gripping, inspiring movie, the story in the text is it. We say that being fully aware that the scriptwriters placed some of the text scenes in plays and movies before. However, those attempts did not capture the intriguing interplays of gender, hypocrisy, religious contradictions, charitable giving, and the flow of divine grace from the text.

The text forces us, against every traditional religious bone, to ask a life-saving question: to what extent do we try to force the operation of God into our neat religious suitcases? Maybe you can ask the same question in a different way. How open are we to the unconventional hands of God working in ways that are outside of our traditional religious outlook?

And perhaps the best way to mirror our responses to those concerns is to look at the way we accommodate people who have fallen short of our

prescribed “decent behavior.” Look at it this way. We all say in unanimous chorus that no one is perfect, and all of us fall short and do sin occasionally. But how do we deal with actual sinners, people who admit their sin and would like to turn new pages in their lives? Do we embrace them, or do we “try to help them” by reminding them and telling others of their ugly past? Can we distinguish between restoring people and condoning sinful behavior?

In this text, we see an ocean of contrast between the attitude of many religious people (the Pharisee) and the attitude of God to known sinners who want to turn new pages in life. Perhaps it is this contrast that prompted David’s thinking in 2 Samuel 24:14, “I’m in a desperate situation!” David replied to Gad. “But let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great. Do not let me fall into human hands.” Watch how this plays out in the lesson.

Let us close this section by recognizing this is not an academic question: something we raise for discussion only. It affects people’s responses to our invitations to visit or become members in our churches. The research shows there is a direct line between how we respond to sinners and the growth and health of our churches.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

Our reading of verses 47-48 says the woman was walking with a heavy burden of her sins. This would mean she was in a great place because it is the heaviness of sin that leads us to repentance, the first step to reconciling with God.

Some commentators read the text to say Jesus had forgiven the woman’s sins previously. They pull support for this view from verse 37, which clearly shows the woman was familiar with Jesus. Under this view, she would have been operating out of an abundance of gratitude.

Whichever view you take, the woman was reaching out to the Savior with

heart-felt passion. This is what we should look for in people who approach us looking for comfort and relief. As best we can, look for the connection between what is coming out of the mouth and the emotions from the heart. Yes, we know there are great scammers on the prowl. With practice, you will become efficient at accessing the truth in the appeals.

The anointing of guests was a standard practice in Palestine. By the accepted practice, the woman should have anointed Jesus with one or two drops of the ointment. But her repentance or gratitude was overwhelming. So, she let it all out: all the passion and all the ointment. She could hold back neither.

Traditionally, we have made the woman guilty of sexual sin. But this is pure conjecture. Maybe that description falls within the Jewish mindset of that period. However, we have no direct evidence to say this was so. Likewise, we stand on shifting sand when we identify this woman as Mary Magdalene. Making these two speculations can give commentators the platform they need to make certain points they are determined to make, regardless. So be it! All we are saying is that neither the text in the Bible nor the historical records support them.

Jesus' words to his host, the Pharisee, were a fitting rebuke which exposed the usual hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Publicly, they held themselves out as perfect keepers of the law and traditions. But privately, they were just as lacking as anyone else. Here was the Pharisee in his home hosting Jesus and failing to honor the established traditions! And who upheld the traditions? A sinful woman, the lowest of the low in society!

Do we still see this in our society today? Do we see non-Christians, drunkards, drug-addicts, and prostitutes stepping up and offering help and relief to people in society, while Christians look on with eyes of judgment? Your answer is the same as ours.

In lessons on this text, it is usual to note how Jesus crossed social barriers

of his day. And that is a valid observation. But rather than expanding that point, let us look at the posture of the woman in verse 38. She is at Jesus' feet, behind him, weeping. We regret no one had a smartphone that day. That photo shot would have been a perfect snapshot of humility. And it is not gender specific. That is the posture we must take when we approach Christ, whether in contrition or in thanksgiving. It is this position in verse 38 which set up Jesus' declaration in verse 48. Anyone who is not getting a response from God must go back to verse 38 and check their spiritual posture before God.

Verse 39 is classic Pharisee behavior. But is it only the Pharisees who act this way? That Pharisee did not care that a woman was being set free (or was freed) from her weight of sin. What was important to him was that the traditional religious code was being broken. We saw this same vile attitude when Jesus healed on the Sabbath. The stalwarts of religion could not rejoice with the people who Jesus had cured from crippling or fatal diseases. Their concern was the Sabbath tradition was being polluted.

How would this attitude look today? If someone turned up at the church for ministry on Tuesday and we tell them to come back on Sunday, is that similar? When people do not dress, behave, or follow our traditional religious manual, can we still minister to them, or do we first have to get them in line with the rules?

What is our priority in ministry: ensuring everything is done "in decency and good order" or ministering to the needs of people? Just for the record, neither Jesus nor the woman in the text were acting in "good order" that day. They were out of order so a hurting soul could be rescued. We will not mention that the woman was not invited to the dinner, and so was a party crasher, a class of people it is difficult to embrace.

## SANKOFA

*"I dressed up as a homeless man and sat outside our church. What I*

*witnessed blew me away... #love2live2love.”*

This quote is from a posting on <https://www2.cbn.com/newcbn.com> where Pastor James MacDonald, in an experiment to assess the reception visitors got at his church, dressed as a homeless man and presented himself to the church. Note his reaction to the reception.

Such surprise evaluations go back to the fourth century with Saint Martin of Tours (a Christian bishop). And we have a parallel report from a colleague, a senior pastor who invited “a guy from the block” to his church’s Sunday morning worship service.

We can stir a spirited discussion by reviewing the unfortunate results in all three cases. But probably a more useful exercise would be to assess how our church brothers and sisters would react in similar cases. Let us go back to the traditional profile of the woman in the text as a sex worker. What would happen if next Sunday morning she turned up on the steps of our church dressed in the uniform of her profession? How would our church brothers and sisters react to her? Would she be greeted warmly and friendly, and where would we seat her? Would anyone thank her for coming and invite her to come back? Who would get her contact information and follow up with the sister? Note that the woman in the text turned up unannounced, and out of order.

This exercise should have special appeal to church members who often call for us to make the Gospel relevant and demand that we keep it real.

## CASE STUDY

As noted above, it is usual in studies of this text to emphasize how Jesus broke the social barriers, especially those relating to women. While this is true, today we must push that discussion further and ask if we ourselves are not propping up traditions that sanction discrimination against selected people.

Let us run fast to say this issue of how believers practice hospitality in the church is not new. James addressed this very thing in James chapter 2, where he begged us not to discriminate in how we welcome people to our churches. It was wrong then, and remains wrong now, to welcome and guide celebrities (in designer clothes) to the plush cushioned seats at the front, while hiding homeless people (in dirty rags) in a corner behind the columns in the church.

At a time when we complain of people avoiding church, we must go back to basics and look at how we welcome visitors. It is so easy to miss the importance of a great welcome. And it is ironic that churches spend so much time and money on promotional activities, and yet run-away visitors at the doors or lobby of the church.

Here we share a note on the importance of the welcome from [www.hospitalitynet.org/](http://www.hospitalitynet.org/):

“In any hospitality environment, the spirit of welcome is so important in creating a strong foundation for the guest experience. Each person, each point of contact, can add so much to the ‘welcoming’ experience for guests! A welcome goes beyond words, it creates a feeling of caring and gives a sense of pleasure.”

We emphasize only two phrases of the note. “Each person” and “each point of contact.” Making visitors feel welcome is not the exclusive job of the hosts and hostesses at the door. Each member is part of the welcoming team. And the work becomes easy once we can get past the attitude of Simon the Pharisee.

## LIFE APPLICATION

We remember the sinner woman in the text because of her lavish anointing of Jesus, but often we miss that she gave a dazzling display of faith. She was uninvited to the dinner party, yet she entered. She was a walking example of sin, yet she approached the most holy man to walk the earth. And she was outside the religious community, yet she walked away with the gold medal of all religions: right standing with God.

To what extent is she a hero? If she is, to what extent does she motivate you to imitate her? Are you prepared to follow your heart and an honest reading of scripture to get right with God? Consider this, keeping before you that all religious activity should lead us to keep the two great commandments of Matthew 22:37-40. Anything else is peripheral, optional, and therefore unimportant.

In the **Sankofa**, we looked at the way we treat people from a corporate view. Let us now step a round higher and consider how the text affects our personal attitude to people we meet in everyday life outside the church. The text tells us the woman was a sinner and highlights two attitudes: Jesus' welcome and the host's condemnation.

It is natural to say we identify with Jesus' position, and no person can challenge our answer. Yet here is a simple exercise. Take the woman out of Jesus' dinner party and put her in the food store or restaurant you visit often. Place her at a birthday party you are attending, or on public transportation you are using. Just put this sinner woman where you will interact with her outside the church. Whose attitude will she see in you: Jesus or Simon? Could you rise to help her when all the other people around her are looking down on her with eyes of scorn?

Our walk of faith is not limited to the heroic moments we are happy to give as testimonies in church. Our walk of faith is in the steps we take in everyday encounters with ordinary people.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. How does knowing the sin the woman committed help or hurt your appreciation of the story?
2. This woman had a name, but we do not know it. How would your appreciation of the story change if we knew the woman's name?
3. Would you advise a best friend to follow this woman's example and crash a party to save a soul?

## **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn/Song:** "Be Thou My Guardian and My Guide"

**Closing Prayer:** Dear Father, help me to develop the attitude that Christ showed to people: an attitude to accept them where they are, being aware I am no more than two steps away from where there are. Thank you, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

### **April 22-April 28**

**Monday** 1 Kings 17:8-16 (God Provides for a Gentile Woman)

**Tuesday** 1 Kings 17:17-24 (God's Authority Over Life and Death)

**Wednesday** Luke 4:24-30 (God Blesses Whomever God Wills)

**Thursday** Psalm 61 (Hear My Cry, O God)

**Friday** Psalm 20 (May God Grant Your Heart's Desire)

**Saturday** James 4:1-10 (God Gives Grace to the Humble)

**Sunday** Matthew 15:21-28 (Jesus Hears a Desperate Mother's Plea)

LESSON 9: APRIL 28, 2024

# FAITH OF A CANAANITE WOMAN

**Lesson Scripture:** Matthew 15:21-28

**Focus Scripture:** Matthew 15:21-28

**Key Verse:** Jesus answered (the Canaanite woman), “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment. Matthew 15:28

## MATTHEW 15:21-28 (NRSV UE)

- 21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.
- 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”
- 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”
- 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”
- 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”
- 26 He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”
- 27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”
- 28 Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

## MATTHEW 15:21-28 (KJV)

- 21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.
- 22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.
- 23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought

him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

## KEY TERMS

- **Marginalized** – Living or considered being on the margins (edges) of a group or society; outside the mainstream.
- **Gentiles** – Non-Jews.
- **Myopic** – Short-sightedness; having narrow views of a matter.
- **Repartee** – Wordplay; a crafty response.
- **Socio-economic** – Relating to (a person's) social and economic status.

## INTRODUCTION

We have various ways to approach this text. For people with a great appetite to relate scripture to social and political realities, the passage is excellent for highlighting the struggles poor and marginalized people endure in our society. Others have pointed to Jesus' behavior, which, in a casual reading, seemed insulting by calling the woman a dog. But we must twist the text out of its historical and social context to form this opinion.

Although those are interesting angles, we want to travel a route which keeps the spiritual integrity of the text, to improve maturity in our devotional life. To do this, we must observe that we live in the age of microwave and AI technology, where people demand everything be done immediately and without effort. This mentality has permeated our politics, and unfortunately, into our theology as well. As a result, many popular religious shows feed the idea that we can demand or order God to deliver what we want when we want it.

That is a fallacy. The truth is, despite our pleadings, religious rituals, and/or faith offerings, God does not always grant our desires with microwave or AI speed. Sometimes, God must first prepare us for the delivery of our requests. This preparation involves stirring in us the measure of faith that we have. Consider this aspect as you wrestle with the text.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

Although the text states it plainly, we emphasize it here. In verse 21, despite the traditional disdain his people (the Jews) had for the Gentiles, Jesus deliberately left the Jewish town of Galilee and went purposely into the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. He was not there by accident or forced circumstances. He decided to go there. This must be the jump-off point for any meaningful discussion of the text.

So, if he chose to visit a Gentile region, what would have been his normal expectation? Who did he expect to meet? Gentiles! Sit on this when you hear people forcing the text to say Jesus insulted the woman. Rather, see the events that followed in the same way we see John 4:4 with the woman at the well. Jesus had a divine purpose for going there, and part of that purpose was an encounter with the Gentile woman. So, we likewise must dare to minister among “the dogs” in our society: among the social dogs, political dogs, and religious dogs.

Verse 23 exposes in gripping colors the contrast in attitudes between the

Lord and the disciples. Jesus went out of his way to get within the reach of the woman. The disciples, in the reverse, went out of their way to separate Jesus from the woman. There is a lesson here. We must never let the value people put on us, based on their traditional myopic views, prevent us from seeing our MasterCard value in the eyes of God. Whenever we reach out to God sincerely, he always sees us as priceless. By the way, this is the same view God has of the people we cannot stand on occasions.

Verse 22 can be tricky for persons who want to play out racial and gender bias in the passage. By addressing Jesus as the “Son of David,” the woman anchored the encounter in her understanding of the Jewish religious system and prophecies. She opened the door to the inherent biases but appealed to Jesus to favor her despite those biases. Read her response in verse 27 in that context.

And what are the implications of that approach for us today? Often, we as believers can waste time telling ourselves we cannot get what is due to us because of all the biases in the prevailing systems. This woman opened her heart for God’s favor, despite the social and religious biases of her era. That is the faith we should practice. We must assure ourselves that the hands of our God can reach us through any systematic bias and or discrimination. If we must first remove the evil system for God to reach us, then the evil system is greater than our God. Think of the implications of that suggestion.

To understand Jesus’ words and behavior in this encounter, we must understand the debating customs of that period. Jesus engaged in a type of wordplay (verbal sparring) that tested the woman’s understanding of God’s true character. He wanted to challenge her view of God beyond the normal Jewish-biased image of God. This repartee pushed the Canaanite woman to

see in Jesus (the Messiah), a God who would hear and respond to someone outside the privileged class of Jews.

That sort of engagement was common among some Jewish rabbis. It was a way to test an opponent's character, intelligence, honor, etc. This verbal device forced the opponent to defend or prove the validity of his or her argument. See another example of this in Mark 12. Note also at Mark 12:9, Jesus highlighted the God he wanted the Canaanite woman to see: a God who would open the kingdom to "others" (non-Jews).

## SANKOFA

In your Bible, the Canaanite woman has no name, but in the history books, her name is Madam C. J. Walker, the visionary behind the Madam C.J. Walker Company and related haircare products. She was born Sarah Breedlove in 1867, a time when the rulers of the society went out of their way to stifle the upward mobility of black people. Some writers on that period said life then for black people was worse than during slavery. Only a black woman with a rare form of insanity could entertain a vision of owning her own business and becoming a millionaire. Yet C. J. Walker saw through her daunting circumstances to a vision of a life that was better, much better, than being just a "washer" (a common job for black women then).

With support and encouragers from the AME Church (St. Louis and Denver), C.J. Walker, like the Canaanite woman, reached for what was not normally available to people like her. And like the Canaanite woman, she received lavishly. Read her story at <https://www.history.com/news/madam-cj-walker-business-millionaire> or similar postings.

Her life and achievements say to disadvantaged people that they can receive from God and succeed, despite stifling discrimination. And it is not always necessary to change systems or people's ugly perceptions of them.

The favor of God can deliver for us despite the obstacles we faced. And did C.J. Walker face obstacles? You decide.

She was born to slaves, became an orphan before age 10, had to flee from living with an abusive brother-in-law, married at age 14, and was widowed at age 16. On the personal level, she had two other marriages, was partially uneducated, and suffered from a serious hair disease. Did she have obstacles?

So how could a woman with 50 of the 52 cards of life stacked against her rise to become a great millionaire, philanthropist, and advocate for woman's rights? She did it the same way all great achievers do. Madam Walker stopped looking for people to complain to, and stopped focusing on who was to blame for her plight. Instead, she looked for opportunities, and in a walk of faith worked those opportunities, despite the stacked deck life gave her. In short, it was faith and vision in action. The same qualities the Canaanite woman drew on.

### **CASE STUDY**

Although it is a moot point, at the heart of the text was a question about the character and related favor of God. Was God an exclusive Jewish God, or was God a God who was accessible to all people irrespective of race, gender, or social standing? The Canaanite woman, with the help of Jesus, saw the latter view of God.

But what about us today? What is our view of God? Is God white, black, male, female, conservative, or progressive? As noted elsewhere, God made humans in his own image. And it seems that people try to return the favor to God by making God in the image that works for them. Thus, some ministers sell us an ultra-conservative God who works only through them and their preferences. This God wants a world that keeps the status quo, which allows the dominant classes to remain in place, and keeps all other persons settling for the "crumbs" that fall from the masters' tables.

At the other extreme, we find an ultra-progressive God, who wants to turn the status quo on its head and put into practice the scripture which says the first shall be last and the last the first. This God wants to make all the current powerbrokers and rulers into slaves and make the current struggling workers the billionaire and the powerbrokers. This God rejects all the traditional rules and rituals and seems to operate without any guardrails. Floating somewhere between these two extremes are various versions of God.

Hence, we must know what the Bible teaches about the character of God. Our favorite answer to that question starts in Psalm 89:14-15: <sup>“14</sup> Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Unfailing love and truth walk before you as attendants. <sup>15</sup> Happy are those who hear the joyful call to worship, for they will walk in the light of your presence, Lord.” From this angle, no one person or race has a monopoly on God. The almighty is available to all persons who operate in righteousness, justice, love, truth, and sincere worship of God.

While God chose the Jewish nation to reveal certain divine traits to humanity, God is not Jewish, white, black, or brown. The Spirit of the Lord works through all societies and all cultures for people who respect God’s demands for righteousness, justice, love, truth, and sincere worship. This view of God put the emphasis on the spirit of our worship rather than on the specific worship rituals. Like the Canaanite woman, we do not have to find another Jesus. The Savior of the Bible is as much ours as he is the Lord of other races. But also like the Gentile woman, we must be careful in accepting the character of God that other people want to feed us. This matter is one of life and death, for the view of God we hold decides the life we live, and our view of life after death.

## LIFE APPLICATION

Jesus responded to the Gentile woman, despite his declaration that his

priority was the lost sheep of Israel. The woman lived on the fringes of Jewish society. Today, we also meet people who live on the fringes of our society. Therefore, as representatives of Christ, we must assess how our outreach to such persons reflects God's love for marginalized people.

Consider this in a realistic manner. We cannot solve all the problems of marginalized people. But like Jesus, we get opportunities occasionally to go out of our normal path to help poor or hurting people. Take some quality time to consider how well you respond to the needs of those persons. Your efforts may be as an individual, as a member of an outreach group, or through your support of programs that cater to needy folks. Do not pressure yourself unduly on this matter, but consider the opportunities we get to help social outcasts both within and outside our faith community.

The text challenges us to consider how we see people. Soberly consider the extent to which factors like race, gender, political affiliation, social position, and religious denominations influence your decisions to render assistance to a person in need. In ideal circumstances, we should see the needs of people before we see their social label. Granted, this is not easy. Yet, the mere exercise of considering how well we see people's needs above their social labels forces us to see the degree to which we are reflecting the attitudes of Christ.

Normally, when we discuss helping people, we focus on their material needs. And this is wonderful. Still, we must recognize that people's greatest needs are often emotional and spiritual. And this issue can show a bias on our part. It relates to whom we approach in our evangelism efforts.

Some believers are eager to share their faith with ordinary people who live in their social circles. They have no hesitation in sharing the Gospel with the poor and working poor. However, they are more hesitant about approaching persons in the higher classes of society. They can be timid when approaching doctors, lawyers, politicians, business owners, bankers, and insurance executives with the Good News.

Consider whether you or your group practice such biases or fears. If indeed one person needs to hear the Gospel, all people need to hear the Gospel. You may want to discuss this matter with your pastor, evangelist, or mature Christian brother or sister. With the right training and practice, we can kill the fear of sharing the Gospel with people in the higher social classes. Jesus set the example for us. He spoke freely with people of all socio-economic classes and nationalities.

Here is an exercise you may find useful. You can do this alone or with a small group of Christian brothers and sisters. At a convenient time, take a stroll along a familiar street in your church's district. Make notes of the needy people you see or encounter. Do not engage anyone on this first trip unless it is an emergency. Just make some notes of the people in need and what people can do to assist them.

At the end of the exercise, consider which case or cases you will seek to help, either as an individual or with the cooperation of others. Some of your plans will be short-term and others for the longer term. Naturally, you will exercise the appropriate caution and wisdom for each case.

This exercise will reveal three important things. First, helping people is often much easier than we are imaging. Second, there are people around us who are open to helping others, but usually they do not want to start an engagement. They will readily assist people who are brave enough to take the lead. Third, it is easy to share the Gospel as we help needy people.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why is it crucial to have the right view of God's identity and character?
2. What are the dangers, if any, of describing God in terms of race and gender?
3. In terms of life today, what lessons can we learn from the life and

achievements of Madam C.J. Walker (**Sankofa**)?

## **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” *AMEC Hymnal* #84

**Closing Prayer:** All-embracing God, guide my understanding of your true character and love for me. Help me to walk in a way that is worthy of your support. I ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

### **April 29–May 5**

**Monday** Psalm 35:1-7, 22-28 (Vindicate Me, O Lord My God)

**Tuesday** Psalm 112 (Blessed Are They Who Fear God)

**Wednesday** Acts 3:12-26 (Repent and Turn to God)

**Thursday** John 3:1-8, 13-17 (God so Loved the World)

**Friday** Psalm 5 (Lord, Lead Me in Your Righteousness)

**Saturday** 1 John 1:1–2:2 (Christ Our Atoning Sacrifice)

**Sunday** Romans 3:21-30 (Atonement by Christ’s Blood)

LESSON 10: MAY 5, 2024

# JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN JESUS

**Lesson Scripture:** Romans 3:21-30

**Focus Scripture:** Romans 3:21-30

**Key Verses:** For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:22b-24

## ROMANS 3:21-30 (NRSV UE)

- 21 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets,
- 22 the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction,
- 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;
- 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
- 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;
- 26 it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.
- 27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. Through what kind of law? That of works? No, rather through the law of faith.
- 28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.
- 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of gentiles also? Yes, of gentiles also,
- 30 since God is one, and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

## ROMANS 3:21-30 (KJV)

21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

26 To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:

30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

## KEY TERMS

- **Eternal Security Doctrine** – The teaching which says once a person truly repents and accepts Christ as Savior, that person's salvation is eternally secured and cannot be lost by subsequent sinful deeds.
- **Ascetic** – Punitive and severe, especially of rituals.
- **Psyche** – The whole being, the soul, or essence of life.
- **Propitiation** – Appeasement offering or gesture (offered to please God).

- **Testy** – Test as in belief, patience, etc.; irritating.
- **Patron** – Supporter, sponsor, donor of person or event, usually for a given cause.
- **Pedigree** – The true class (qualification) that gives a person rights to special honors.
- **Beneficiaries** – People who benefit from an act.

## INTRODUCTION

In this section, we turn from individuals acting in faith (courage) to the grounding or reasoning behind the theology of righteousness with God through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. To most of us today, this is a simple concept because we have heard it all our lives. And what is the competing theology? It is that we can get right with God by keeping certain rules and rituals in a prescribed form (works).

To appreciate this and similar lessons, consider how difficult it is for someone to change your mind about an idea or concept you have believed in all your life. You heard that idea at home from your parents, at school, at church, at work, and in all your encounters with friends and family. Now comes a new teacher or group that tells you what you have heard and believed all your life is wrong.

We have deliberately not put an issue in this explanation to stay clear of emotive responses. Nevertheless, consider your response to the new teaching. How easy is it to let go of something you have believed in all your life, and which leading, respected authorities have approved?

As you read Apostle Paul's arguments on justification with God purely by faith in Christ, appreciate that this was the uphill battle he was fighting. He was asking the Jews to let go of something that was ingrained in their

psyche. Worse yet, he was calling on them to adopt a new thinking which shook the foundation of their righteousness with God. How easy is it for you to accept you are wrong, and have been wrong on an issue all your life?

## TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

At the start, appreciating the text brings us into an argument that Paul started at the beginning of the book of Romans. The jump-off point for the text is the preceding verse 20, which states the purpose of the law was not to reconcile sinners with God, but to show what sin is and how sinful we are.

If therefore, the law with its works (rituals) and provisions could not make us right with God, what could make us right? The obvious answer is grace through faith in Jesus the Christ. Everything in the text revolves around this key concept. Let us see how Paul sold the argument.

In verse 23, Paul in effect summarized the arguments he presented in chapters 1 and 2: all people (Jews and Gentiles) have sinned. We have all missed the divine standard for right standing before God. This was not a hard point to sell because the Jewish religious system rested on it, and the need to seek reconciliation with God.

At verse 25, Paul anchored the argument in another plank of truth the Jews had accepted: God required sacrifice, the shedding of blood, to erase sin. Again, Paul was on friendly ground because animal sacrifice was the foundation of the Jewish system of sin, atonement, and forgiveness. At this point in the argument, Paul was hitting home runs.

Verse 25 is where it gets somewhat testy. Here, Paul made the switch from the traditional animal sacrifice (done annually) to the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Hear Paul make the argument in a modern tone. “My brothers and sisters, you were right in saying God demanded a sacrifice for the erasing of sin. But the real sacrifice is not the sacrifice of a spotless lamb which you buy around the temple. It was the sacrifice of the

pure innocent Lamb, Jesus Christ.”

That was the part the Jews found hard to swallow. How could the sacrifice of one man replace the yearly sacrifice (and other sacrifices) for sin? We can understand why no one cheered when Paul made this argument. It asked the Jews to trade in everything they believed about righteousness and the forgiveness of sin.

Depending on your version of the Bible, you will notice the word “grace” or “gracious” in verse 24. The Jewish audience understood the special mention of this word. Grace, in this context, spoke to what today we call “patronage” or sponsorship. The favor of grace occurred when a patron freely offered an individual a new opportunity (social or financial) in return for the person’s (beneficiary’s) support or loyalty. Grace was therefore free because it cost the beneficiary nothing financially. But the patron expected his loyalty in return.

The same applies to God’s grace in salvation. We cannot buy the favor with money or good works. Yet our loyalty God expects. This is the reason some preachers point out that grace was not free. It cost God the life of Jesus Christ. All it requires from us is our loyalty. That seems like a fair exchange.

In verse 25, Paul reached back to the concept of propitiation, which came from Leviticus 16:14-16. Again, we note this is debating at its best. Paul was brilliant in using the planks from the Jewish religious system of sacrifice to make his point about Christ, the perfect sacrificial lamb of God.

When we visit the Leviticus text, we see that the key to the Jewish atonement process was the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrificed animal on the “mercy seat.” This ritual reminded Israel of the high price of sin. Also, it was an act of faith in God’s ability and willingness to forgive the people’s sins. Can you now see the mastery of Paul’s argument? Paul argued that with salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, the same process was at

play. The only minor adjustment was God's substitution of the perfect man, his sinless son, for a ceremonially perfect lamb. It was the same process, only this time God completed it with true (not ceremonial) perfection.

In verse 26, Paul went for the home run on the argument of how to get right with God. Again, he reached back into the scriptures that the Jews accepted and believed. The “one who has faith / believes” in Jesus Christ is an echo of Habakkuk 2:4, which clearly states that faith (not works and rituals) gives life (a life that is pleasing to God).

This is the steel and concrete in the foundation of the Christian's faith. We are therefore not surprised when we see this truth popping up at so many corners of the New Testament: Romans 3:26, Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38. To all reasonable readers of Romans chapter 3, Paul made his argument with convincing clarity.

## SANKOFA

In verse 30 of the text, Paul underlined the concept that God offers salvation to all people (Jews and Gentiles) on the same basis of faith in Christ. That idea took on a new complexion in recent times, with certain intellectuals questioning the relevance of Christianity for black people. Maybe you have heard the assertion that Christianity is a “white man's religion.” We cannot answer that claim directly in this brief lesson. Yet we address two matters surrounding it.

First, is an observation we heard from a prominent Caribbean politician a few years ago. He noted that in this age of social media, all people need to make themselves expert on any subject is an internet connection and a Google search. Maybe this is nowhere truer than in religious commentary. Today, we have no shortage of self-made social media “theologians.” And these Google-savvy “theologians” freely float ideas which have no intellectual, historical, or biblical legs. Our caution with “arguments” from these “experts” is to check the pedigree of people who give you darts to

throw at Christianity. Popularity on a TV show or on social media is not enough to establish credibility on matters of religion.

Second, on TEDx Edina is a super-excellent, magnificent, cool, must-see talk by Olivia Pierce, entitled “Why Christianity Is Perceived as the White Man’s religion.” We are not promoting that chat. However, if your church offers you an option of a free scholarship to seminary, or a paid one-week course to study that talk, pass on seminary and pay for the course. That talk covers crucial topics like unconscious bias, lack of representation, and the historical realities of the Christian viewpoint. These are the matters which we must assess if we are to gauge the relevance of Christianity for black people. Some people found the short talk by Olivia more stimulating than the emotional rants from some “modern thinkers” who try to cast doubt on Christianity. Again, please check it out.

## CASE STUDY

It is easy to believe that Paul settled conclusively the issue of salvation and removed the tension between works and grace through faith. And in many political alliances, mainstream theology has laid those matters to rest. However, that is not the full story. Among some theologians and philosophers, the question remains on how far the grace of God extends to reach and reconcile humankind to God. As expected, there are varying views on this. They include exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Here are some quotes from Wikipedia on each of these religious views. We share them so readers will know of their existence and be on guard against the confusion they can open. People may not recognize these arguments, or their variations, because supporters of them do not use standard theological jargon. However, if you pay attention to persons who challenge the traditional Christian view, you will recognize these alternative salvation views.

For example, arguments that suggest people have many paths to God, or

rhetorically question if Christianity is the only true religion, take us into these alternative faith perspectives. So, we issue two cautions on this issue.

First, not every faith argument that sounds reasonable is scriptural. Each person must decide in his or her own mind the weight he gives to scripture text. Second, each religious perspective must stand or fall on its own merit. Support of a religious view by a media celebrity does not give the perspective credibility. This is particularly relevant when religious thought is not the specialty of the celebrity. Here are the views.

**“Pluralism** is the belief that multiple religions are true and equally valid in their communication of the truth about God, the world, and salvation. The chief expounder of this view is John Hick of Claremont Graduate School in California, who first propounded it in his book *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973).

**“Inclusivism** is the belief that God is present in non-Christian religions to save adherents through Christ. The inclusivist view has given rise to the concept of the ‘anonymous Christian,’ an adherent of a non-Christian religion whom the Christian God nevertheless saves through Christ. This position was popularized by the Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984).

**“Exclusivism** is the theological position that holds that there is no salvation in non-Christian religions. Notable among the exclusivists of the twentieth century are Samuel Zwemer, Hendrik Kraemer, and Leslie Newbigin. Citing the Aristotelian concept of truth, as one of few, exclusivists regard all religious claims other than Christianity as false and invalid. Exclusivists hold that salvation is through Christ alone, and that non-Christians cannot be saved because they neither recognize Christ’s uniqueness nor lordship.”

Before you say it, let us say it. This is heavy lifting theology and there is no need for you to lose sleep over these concepts. Our intention is purely

that of awareness because error has a way of sneaking up on truth and corrupting it.

On the face of it, exclusivism seems to line up with the scriptural text, and notably the Great Commission. For most of us, that should settle it.

### **LIFE APPLICATION**

In a sense, the text is clear about what we should do if we are outside the community of faith and recognize we are sinners who need forgiveness for sin. By faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, we accept God's grace. That is quite simple.

The problem comes when we sin after accepting Christ as Savior and committing to following his commandments. For simplicity and to make the point, we will sidestep the debatable doctrines, like eternal security. That said, the way to deal with subsequent acts of sin is identical to the way we deal with our original repentance and acceptance of salvation. We repent and accept God's grace. God does not require us to hide our sin, pay special tithes, perform ascetic rituals, or otherwise work our way back into God's grace. The way into salvation is the same way to maintain salvation: grace by faith.

Standing on this truth, consider how you deal with your acts of sin (after salvation). Some people go to extraordinary levels to hide their acts of sin, to maintain a public image of saintly piety. Remember, as King David noted (Psalm 51:4), all sins are in effect acts of disobedience against God, and only God cleans us of sin. We must, therefore, deal with sinful acts in the

way prescribed by God.

But this puts us in a chicken-and-egg loop, since when we enter the community of faith, our behavior should reflect it. In Galatians 5, Paul makes it easy for us to assess whether our behaviors are in keeping with what God demands. Verses 19 to 21 give the behaviors that will keep us outside the kingdom, while verses 22-23 list the behaviors and attitudes that reflect Christ in us. A review of Jesus' teaching on *The Beatitudes* will also help here.

So, what do you do when you recognize a personal struggle with behaviors in verses 19-21? Again, the right action is not to run and hide or to increase the pious pretense. The same Apostle Paul (and King David) points us to steps we can take to deal with this situation.

First, admit you have a problem and prayerfully ask God for help. Note that the *Fruit of the Spirit* are gracious gifts from God, which we get by seeking after them. At this stage, it is useful to seek the support of your pastor or other mature Christians. Hopefully, you can find believers who will not look down on you to prop up their own charade of piety.

Second, you may have to take practical steps to stop feeding the sin. A person dealing with a problem of drunkenness should avoid having lunch in sports bars, where the staff has a vested interest in serving alcoholic drinks. Paul himself had to do this. He took decisive steps to discipline his body, to bring it into subjection (1 Corinthians 9:27). This you may do on your own or with support from others.

Third, get an accountability partner. This is a Christian brother or sister with whom you can be transparent about your struggles. Decency and practical wisdom suggest that your accountability partner should be of the same gender. Because of the sensitive nature of what you may share with the partner, gender and confidentiality rules require special consideration. Ideally, you want a partner who can “keep a secret” and will not try to exploit your struggles and stumbles.

One more parting note! In the text, Paul explained convincingly how salvation, though faith in Christ, works. You may never be called on to give such a defense of faith. Nevertheless, you should be able to explain to anyone who asks why faith in Christ is the only requirement people must meet to get forgiveness of sin. Consider the extent to which you can defend your faith in Christ. You do not need to memorize Paul’s arguments. Just make sure you understand them and can share them in your own words.

## QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of Paul’s reasoning in the text; was it convincing?
2. What link do you see, if any, between the law under Moses and grace under Jesus?
3. Can you detect any teachings in Christianity that are harmful to the interests of black people?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn:** “In Christ Alone”

**Closing Prayer:** Dear Father, guide my heart along the path of your truth. And help me live in that truth for your honor and glory. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

### **May 6-May 12**

**Monday** Matthew 20:1-16 (God Is Generous to the Unworthy)

**Tuesday** Genesis 13:14-18 (A Great and Blessed Nation)

**Wednesday** Genesis 15:1-6 (A Promise of Countless Heirs)

**Thursday** 1 John 2:12-17 (Little Children, Your Sins Are Forgiven)

**Friday** Psalm 32 (God's Abundant Forgiveness)

**Saturday** Romans 4:1-12 (Trust God, Who Justified the Ungodly)

**Sunday** Romans 4:13-25 (Christ Was Raised for Our Justification)

# RECKONED AS RIGHTEOUS

**Lesson Scripture:** [Romans 4](#)

**Focus Scripture:** [Romans 4:13-25](#)

**Key Verses:** (Abraham) grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.  
Romans 4:20-21

## ROMANS 4:13-25 (NRSV UE)

- 13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.
- 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.
- 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.
- 16 For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us,
- 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
- 18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So shall your descendants be.”
- 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.
- 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,
- 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

22 Therefore “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

23 Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone

24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,

25 who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

### **ROMANS 4:13-25 (KJV)**

13 For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

14 For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect:

15 Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.

16 Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

17 (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.

18 Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.

19 And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb:

20 He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;

21 And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.

22 And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.

23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him;

24 But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;

25 Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

## KEY TERMS

- **Ascribe / Ascribing** – Giving credit for or assume (of a character trait).
- **Imprudence** – Reckless foolishness or carelessness.
- **Justification** – Considered right with or pleasing to God (saved, forgiven).
- **Scintillating** – Very exciting; stirring thrills in the mind and body.
- **Hermeneutics** – The theory and practice of interpreting scripture texts.
- **Hedonistic** – The practice of heathens; grossly, ungodly self-indulgence.

## INTRODUCTION

This lesson continues the discussion of salvation (justification) through faith and highlights the best Jewish example of how a person gets God's nod of approval purely by belief. The review of Abraham's actions and faith is important because it focuses on the interplay between belief and actions, and makes clear which is the cause, and which is the effect.

This is important because sometimes when we try to reproduce the results of our heroes, in error we focus on the effects rather than what produced the amazing results. Apparently, the Jews were making this mistake. They attributed Abraham's favor with God to his actions (works) rather than the

motivation behind the actions, his belief in God. This is a mistake we must avoid. Acts of piety may impress other people, but do not justify us before God. Our justification, in God's eyes, still comes from our belief in God. And the acts of piety are only important if they show our level of belief in God. It is crucial that we get the order right.

### **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

Part of the magnificence of this text is that it gives all the key elements of an active faith. As noted elsewhere, faith is not an exercise where a person decides on an outcome for an event and then forces God to produce that outcome. That is not faith but impudence.

Faith starts with a word, promise, or belief surrounding the character of God. In Abraham's case, he rooted his faith in the promise God gave him in Genesis 12:1-3, that he would become the father of many nations. It took faith to believe that promise, given the realities of the lives of Abraham and his wife at the time of the promise.

To appreciate some of the tensions in the text, and how Paul was addressing these, keep before you that Paul was writing to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles. To stay relevant to both groups, he had to define God's people in terms that would give each group an interest in what he was proposing. He knew he was swimming against the Jewish traditions, which defined God's people narrowly as the Jews who kept the law of Moses. That definition emphasized the outward signs of diet, dress, circumcision, and related religious rituals. Paul had to expand this narrow Jewish outlook to cover the Gentiles who were outside that tradition.

That approach brought the practice of circumcising into focus, as the Jews saw this practice as one of the principal badges of honor of God's people. This was one of the defining red lines in this matter. Paul had to cross it with great skill, and so must we.

We must distinguish between faith and the signs or evidence of faith. Paul

was clear that practices like circumcision did not make a person right with God. It was not the source of justification with God, but rather a result or evidence of a person's rightness with God. Circumcision was a sign that Abraham was right with God, but it was not the sign that made him right with God. Paul's entire argument rested on this distinction between the cause and the effect of justification.

This argument is still relevant to us today. Our religious rituals do not make us right with God. Rather, we perform the rituals because we believe in God and want to show that belief in ways we consider acceptable to God. Therefore, we cannot conclude that we are right with God because we observe certain rituals. That position says that people who do not follow our practices are not right with God or "lost." Friends, it is not the rituals that make us right with God. Jesus went to great lengths to make this point in Luke 18 (note Luke 18:14).

This point reoccurs in places like Hebrews 11:8-18. Abraham grounded his faith in the existence and character of God, not on his ability or resources to please God by performing certain duties. We must try hard not to make the same error the Jews had made for centuries on this matter. Only an active belief in God, through faith in Christ, makes us right with God. That belief will work itself out in external signs, but the signs are not the source of our justification with God. The Jews were riding the horse and cart backwards with the cart pulling the horse. We cannot afford to do the same today.

In verses 13-17 Paul reinforced a point he made before in chapter 3, which we addressed in a previous lesson. The law could never justify anyone before God, as that was never the purpose or intent of the law. The law only identified sin. Justification of sinners always flows out of the sinners' faith in the existence and character of God. This is how it was in Abraham's day, and it remains so today.

Finally, this text is one of the most scintillating, uplifting, and sustaining

declarations on faith you will find in any scripture anywhere. The power in this verse (Romans 4:18) is best expressed in the original KJV version. It states, Abraham, “Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, so shall thy seed be.” To analyze this properly, you need one of two things. Either you have two doctorates in hermeneutics from two A-rated seminaries, or a simple enduring appreciation for the beauty of scripture.

The verse says God made Abraham a promise, which by all appearances and circumstances was impossible to fulfill. Yet Abraham, when he had nothing to hang his hope on, still held on to the hope that God would make the impossible promise come true. When everything and everyone around him said it was crazy to believe that God could make the impossible happen, Abraham still believed God would. Yes, we heard you and you are correct! Faith is believing God can and will deliver, when all the circumstances, all the people around you, and even your rational mind shout that it cannot happen. Do you have faith?

## SANKOFA

As noted in the case with Stephen in Acts 7, while faith does not guarantee a particular outcome, it keeps people running forward towards amazing outcomes. A memorable case in point is the achievements of Jesse Owens (James Cleveland Owens). This “Buckeye Bullet” won four gold medals and set two world records at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany, in a time when black athletes were not expected to excel.

Owens’ race of faith started as a child when he had to outrun sickness and battles with chronic bronchial congestion and pneumonia. Owen kept living. Like many of the boys of that era, he had to work to help the family put meager food on the table. So, he also had to outrun working in the cotton fields. In 1935, one year before the Olympics, Owens had to run past a severe tailbone injury. He did and tied a record at the Big Ten

Championships.

But Owens' opponents were not only the athletes he competed against on the athletics field. He was running against a super monster of racial discrimination. Historical reports say Hitler, the German leader, was so infuriated by Owens' victories that he stormed out of the games. But Owens kept running. He ran home to America, where people downplayed his world-stopping success. He did not get the customary congratulations and honor from the president. But Owens kept running. It took from 1936 to 1975 for Owens to get the proper recognition he deserved. Faith keeps us running through life's challenges and biases.

Today, Jesse Owens is a name that still inspires athletes around the world. Just as Jews saw Abraham as the father of faith in Jewish history, Owen is the father of black world-class athletes around the world. Even today, sportswriters connect the success stories of champions like Usain Bolt and Justin Gatlin to the momentous success of Jesse Owens, the athlete who could not be stopped on or off the sports field. That is the momentum that strong faith produces in people.

### **CASE STUDY**

There is a school of thinking that explains faith in terms of a person's "Obedience and Radical Response" to God. Some commentators attribute this approach to the work of theologians, like Karl Barth (1886-1968). In terms of Abraham's faith, these theologians noted that it was much more than a mental assent or belief but involved a ready obedience and radical response to God's callings.

Let us look at this. Abraham at the call of God uprooted his life and moved from his familiar homeland to an unknown, uncertain place. Abraham moved at the command of God, not knowing exactly where he was going. Think about this calmly.

When assigned mission duties, even as believers, we want full details

before we would even consider the assignments. We must know exactly where we are going, what the place is like, what accommodation is available, what the people are like, and how long we will be there. Contrast that with Abraham's response to God. All Abraham knew was that God, at some time in the future, would show him where he was going. Yet, in pure obedience, he obeyed, packed his stuff, got his family, and headed out to nowhere. Is that radical or not?

And Abraham did it again when God asked him to sacrifice his son Issac. To get the magnitude of this obedience, consider that human sacrifice was not a part of the Jewish religious life. This act would have been an extraordinary hedonistic act. Further, Isaac was the son through whom God's promise was to be fulfilled. And there was no backup son. What utter madness! Yet Abraham obeyed!

Those two events are just samples of the radical responses Abraham showed God. The Lord may not ask us for such responses: crazy responses that shake our entire world. Yet when we are considering our own responses to God, let Abraham's responses be our example of the faith responses that please God. Is this exciting? Oh yes, it is! We can be justified in God's eyes in the same way Abraham was justified by God.

### **LIFE APPLICATION**

In normal conversation, we have no problem in ascribing to God the general power to do anything. Our challenge comes in believing that God will do the specific things we desire. Consider this and reflect on how you can know that God will do for you the specific things you desire. In doing this reflection, consider your thoughts on your standing in the sight of God, your motives for wanting the specified thing, and what input God may require from you. Also note, Abraham received from God not because of his begging skills but because of his capacity to obey God. Consider this in relation to your prayer requests. How obedient are you in relation to the

revealed commands of God?

Review Abraham's walk of faith in Genesis and underline both the high negative points and the high positive points. Do a similar review of your own faith walk from the time you accepted Christ as Lord and Savior to your position today in the body of Christ. Do you see a similar pattern of high negative points and high positive points? What do these patterns (Abraham's and yours) say to you? This can be a very maturing exercise when we approach it with a reasonable degree of honesty and maturity. If you find yourself condemning yourself harshly, you are most likely not doing the exercise with the right mindset.

Sometimes we show a tendency which holds people to a higher standard of faith than what we ourselves practice. This usually comes out when we see or hear about a brother or sister who fell in their walk along the road of faith. We can easily say what the person should have done to avoid the fall, and the associated pain and disgrace. Here is a little something that will add years of maturity to your walk of faith.

The next time you learn of the fall (into sinful behavior) of anyone (friend or foe), consider yourself in the identical situation and what resources (internal strength) you would use to avoid a similar fall. When done properly, this consideration helps us to take an inventory of our spiritual resources. Respect that apart from Christ, no one has a perfect walk of faith. Despite all we have noted about Abraham, the birth of Ishmael showed his walk of faith had stumbles.

Abraham is a useful role model. About that position, we have no doubt. But we do not have direct access to Abraham today. Thankfully, we do have access to people who have kept their walk of faith intact despite walking through some violent storms. It can be maturing to discuss with such people how they kept their faith intact during the storms and challenges of life.

In any such discussion, please do not try to push the people beyond where

they may want to go. Kindly accept that what a person shares with you depends on the level of their relations with you, and their subjective assessment of the level of trust they can place in you. Also consider that a person may appear whole on the outside, and still be processing an event or healing from it. Wisdom in these discussions is always the principal thing.

## QUESTIONS

1. Looking back over your life, what personal action can you share that showed your trust in God?
2. What assurances would you need from God to go on a mission where you knew there was a risk of failure?
3. To you, what is a modern equivalent of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn:** "I Trust in God," *AMEC Hymnal* #453

**Closing Prayer:** Patient Lord, help me when I am slow in responding to your words or promises. In those times, remind me of your faithfulness, unlimited power, and limitless resources to see me through any ordeal you call me to. I accept that the way to your favor is faith in your grace. Lord, I thank you for keeping me. In Jesus' name! Amen.

## HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

### May 13-May 19

**Monday** Isaiah 26:1-11 (Trusting in God Brings Perfect Peace)

**Tuesday** Isaiah 40:1-11 (The Penalty Has Been Paid)

**Wednesday** Acts 2:1-4, 14, 16-24, 36 (God's Spirit Poured Upon All Flesh)

**Thursday** Acts 2:37-47 (The Firstfruits of Reconciliation)

**Friday** Genesis 33:1-15 (Brothers at Long Last Reconcile)

**Saturday** Psalm 29 (May God Bless Us With Peace)

**Sunday** Romans 5:1-11 (Peace With God Through Jesus Christ)

LESSON 12: MAY 19, 2024

# RECONCILED TO GOD

**Lesson Scripture:** Romans 5:1-11

**Focus Scripture:** Romans 5:1-11

**Key Verse:** Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1

## ROMANS 5:1-11 (NRSV UE)

- 1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
- 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
- 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance,
- 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,
- 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.
- 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
- 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.
- 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.
- 9 Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.
- 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.
- 11 But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

## ROMANS 5:1-11 (KJV)

- 1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our

Lord Jesus Christ:

- 2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
- 3 And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;
- 4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope:
- 5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.
- 6 For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.
- 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.
- 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
- 9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.
- 10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.
- 11 And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

## KEY TERMS

- **Paradox** – A seemingly self-contradicting statement.
- **Tribulation** – A cause of great harm or suffering.
- **Circumvent** – Finding a way around an obstacle.
- **Eternal Security** – The doctrine that once saved, a person cannot lose that salvation.
- **Captivating** – Attracting and holding a person's interest.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Many years ago, a promotion pitch preachers used to get members into their churches was, “Come to Jesus and everything will be alright.” In a spiritual sense, that claim was and still is true, as a right relationship with Christ answers all the genuine issues of life. However, on the physical plane, committing one’s life to Christ is no guarantee that all earthly matters will be resolved as we desire.

Indeed, when we commit ourselves to a relationship with Christ, some new challenges come our way. Prior to the commitment, we were free to live as we like and freely follow the world’s standards for happiness and success. After the commitment, we are under an obligation to pursue lifestyles that reflect our relationship with Christ. And in many ways, these holy lifestyles put us at odds with the world. Follow the text carefully and see what believers get when they come into a relationship with Christ, and how God helps them to face the challenges of the new life in Christ. The redeemed sinner lives a paradox of peace and tribulations.

## **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

In this text, the first verse (Romans 5:1) holds the key to the grenade Paul threw into the argument of how people get cleansed of sin and reconciled with God. He started the reasoning with the word “therefore,” signaling that in the preceding chapters, he had successfully made his argument that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. It is as if Paul is saying, “Seeing that you accept my argument of salvation through grace by faith, let me tell you what happens next.” He then explained the saved person’s positional relationship with God (now that he has accepted salvation through faith).

Although you must read the text carefully to get this message, the saved (justified) person moves from being an enemy of God (a hater and rebel against God) to become a friend of God. The selected passage explains the working of this new relationship in the believer's life.

The first benefit of this new relationship with God is peace. Our acceptance of God's salvation offer dismantles the previous sin barriers of hostility, and we gain free access into the presence and favor of God. We become like children having free access to a parent who receives them lovingly. Elsewhere, Paul refers to this relationship as making us heirs and joint heirs with Christ. Peace with God is, therefore, one of the surest ways to tell if a person is indeed a believer.

Between verses 3-5, Paul gives the step-by-step process which moves the believer to a strong, confident hope in Christ. The destination is a mature hope in Christ, but we do not get there in one move: it is a process. And to be brutally honest, we often wish we could avoid or circumvent the process because it is painful. Moreover, during this process, many believers stumble and fall. Thankfully, after each stumble, smart Christians get back up and keep walking in faith according to the hope that is in them.

Here, we must divert to note this text is one of the steel platforms on which the doctrine of *Eternal Security* floats. Proponents of that doctrine hold that what we call falls or relapses in sin are just the trials and problems Paul is acknowledging in this text. They argue with confidence that slips, falls, and stumbles into sinful behavior are all part of the course in the walk of faith.

As we have noted before, we cannot support or deny such arguments in a lesson of this nature. What we can boldly say is this. The requirement for building or keeping a friendly relationship with God is the same, whether it is your first sin or your millionth sin. God's grace accessed through faith in Christ never changes. And if Jesus teaches that believers must forgive their brothers and sisters at least 490 times (technically speaking), the grace of

God must be capable of reaching us at least 491 times. *Eternal Security* doctrine or not, the door to friendship with God is wide open to the repentant sinner. We cannot maintain by works what we got by grace in the first place.

But verses 3-5 contain another embedded message. To get it, compare those verses with Hebrews 11:1-2 which describes hope as a confident expectation of something not yet seen. In the text, Paul adds another dimension, where God is in the background diligently working on believers' hearts and character, and thereby transforming them into his image. The time we spend waiting on the manifestation of hope is therefore not wasted time. It is transformation time. See 2 Corinthians 3:18 for further confirmation of this truth.

Also in verse 5, we see another powerful aspect of the love of God. Our Savior knows that during the waiting, testing, and transforming period, life is hard, and we can be pushed to our limits, physically and spiritually. Often, we may look stupid both to ourselves and to the people around us. So, God, in his infinite wisdom, made provision for our comfort during these testing times. He gave us the Holy Spirit, who sustains and assures us in hard times.

The application message to us is simple. During our times of trial, rely on the resources of the Holy Spirit. If we do that, we shall never be put to shame for having a useless or hollow hope. The Holy Spirit will confirm and display in us the reality and soundness of our hope in God. The point is repeated in Ephesians 1:13-14.

Verses 6-10 make two significant points that should not surprise us. The first one draws on the culture of Paul's times. In Roman culture, the highest ideal of friendship was the willingness to die for a friend. Paul used this idea to show how God transcends the highest ideals of friendship by allowing Jesus Christ to be brutally crucified for sinners. Jesus' sacrifice showed how dear a friendship God wanted with us.

Second, that section was sending a subtle call to the church in Rome to pursue God's radical love by loving the people who were persecuting believers. This call is in line with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:11, 39-42.

In summary, we can say the text gives us both the benefits and challenges of a life in Christ. Most of all, it highlights the glorious hope every believer should live in.

## SANKOFA

The text painted a vivid picture of former enemies becoming friends. As sinners, we were enemies of God, having no ready access to the favors reserved for the friends of God. When we became believers through faith in Jesus Christ, our relationship with God changed, and we became friends with God. This gave us access to God's presence and favors. The power of this image becomes captivating when we see it played out in the world.

One stunning example of this foe-to-friend drama played out between Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel. From your world history, you know Egypt and Israel had a long history of holding knives to each other's throats. In 1978, despite the hostile conditions between their two countries, the two leaders, with help from the West, engaged in a series of diplomatic initiatives. Observers noted that as the initiatives developed, so did the level of respect and civility between the two leaders. While there are different theories explaining the personal relations between the two men, one thing is certain. By September 1978, they had reached a level of mutual respect and friendship that made an agreement possible.

The 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel was the product of the new, friendlier relations between the two countries and their leaders. By and large, the world breathed easier with the signing of the Accords. The Nobel Committee took note and awarded Sadat and Begin the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize.

Like Sadat and Begin, believers move from being enemies hostile to God

to dear friends with access to God's presence and favor. What a beautiful picture! Believers should cherish this imagery. Sadat and Begin got a Nobel Prize. We receive a glorious crown!

## CASE STUDY

The text set up a tension that persons outside the community of faith cannot readily understand. We dare to say that even immature members within the community may not grasp the full outworking of this tension. Consider this picture. On the right hand, we have peace and access to God, the almighty creator and sustainer of the universe. But on the other hand, we are open to the trials, frustrations, and pain that living for Christ can bring. Elsewhere (2 Corinthians 4:16-17) Paul explains that in the relationship with God, the physical body or person may suffer (perish). Yet at the same time, the spirit body (the real person) prospers and glorifies God.

Jesus (in John 15) also alluded to this reality: being a believer will make us targets for hostility from both the enemy of our soul and people committed to his world. James hammered home this tension in James 4:4, where he noted that friendship with the world puts us in a hostile relationship with God, and the reverse stands.

This is a tension each believer must live through. It forces believers at each stage of life to make conscious decisions on where to put the emphasis in their lives. Some smart televangelists sell the idea that we can have the best of both worlds. They show us that Christians can worship God sincerely from the comfort of personal private jets and lavish mansions. The empirical data on this we leave to each person's assessment.

Our only caution on this is the same Jesus gave at Mark 9:35-36, <sup>“35</sup> If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. <sup>36</sup> And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?”

Does Jesus say that to be a good Christian we must live in a homeless shelter with food from a pantry? Of course not. But the interpretation of that verse must embrace the related caution in Luke 12:15 on greed. In whatever way we read these cautions, our spiritual welfare must take priority over our physical comforts. Expressing those cautions within the tension of the text, we conclude that believers should use their peace with God to weather the physical sufferings they meet in this life. We must never let the natural urge to avoid trials and suffering force us to compromise our relationship with the Lord.

## **LIFE APPLICATION**

Throughout the ages, Christians suffered much persecution because practicing their faith often put them at odds with popular cultures and trends in their societies. Soberly consider this and the reasons it seems inevitable that Christians and the wider society will always be on opposite sides of the train track. Some answers for this tension are in texts like John 15:18-27 and related passages.

Do you accept that merely being a believer and follower of Christ marks you for persecution in this world? If you accept that premise, how do you face that reality, and what strategies do you have for dealing with the inevitable tribulations? Based on the text, tribulations are God's vehicles for moving us to the destination of a living hope in Christ. Make this matter a point of meditation in your private devotions.

In the Gospels (e.g., Matthew 28:20), Jesus assured us of God's presence even in trials and tribulation. However, to live this reality requires Christian maturity. Consider how well you recognize and draw on the presence of God in times of hardship and suffering. Mature Christians can glory in sufferings and even thank God that he found them worthy to suffer for his sake. Immature believers may curse the sufferings and allow hardships to break or otherwise compromise their walk of faith. Consider where you are

in this matter of seeing and drawing on the presence of God in times of trials and suffering.

There is no shame in this game. If you are in the top half of Christians who draw on the presence of God in rough times, thank the Lord, keep pushing higher, and help your brothers and sisters to get where you are. If, by your own assessment on this matter, you are in the bottom half of believers, seek the maturity that gives you the insight to see God in your dark days. Pursue maturity in this area with the confidence that everyone who seeks God diligently finds him.

Paul went to great pains to teach that we can get salvation only by grace through faith in Christ. Elsewhere, he made it clear that because of this fact, we have no basis on which to boast about our salvation. Against this background, consider how you came to faith in Christ. On reflection, what does your personal story of salvation say to you? Does it bear out the position that you merely answered God's offer by accepting Christ purely by faith? If that is indeed the case, consider how your personal story can sharpen your approach to share Christ with others.

This is important as many people resist the call to salvation because they think they cannot make the effort to change their lives into what is expected of Christians. Based on your personal salvation story, can you witness to others, telling them that if in faith they accept the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the Lord himself will initiate in them the necessary lifestyle changes? Notice that was the way Paul used his own salvation story as a witnessing tool. Try it the next time you get an evangelistic opportunity.

## QUESTIONS

1. As a believer, how do you reconcile within yourself having peace with and access to God with the tribulations of living in this world?
2. What is your personal strategy for glorying God in tribulations?

3. How important to the believer's walk of faith is the Christian hope of eternal life with Christ?

## **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," *AMEC Hymnal* #323

**Closing Prayer:** All-Embrace God, the scripture teaches that I have access to you and your friendship favors. I thank you for reaching down to me when my hands were too short to reach up to you. Thank you for the gift of friendship and the cleansing blood of Jesus to wash away the filth of sin. This I pray in thanksgiving. Amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

### **May 20-May 26**

**Monday** Joel 2:28-32 (Call on God and Be Saved)

**Tuesday** Romans 9:14-16, 25-33 (Striving on the Basis of Faith)

**Wednesday** Romans 11:1-4, 17-27 (All Israel Will Be Saved)

**Thursday** Deuteronomy 30:11-20 (God's Word Is Very Near)

**Friday** Mark 5:35-43 (Do Not Fear, Only Believe)

**Saturday** Isaiah 52 (A Beautiful Announcement of Salvation)

**Sunday** Romans 10:1-17 (Confession and Belief Lead to Salvation)

# WHO HAS BELIEVED?

**Lesson Scripture:** Romans 10:1-21

**Focus Scripture:** Romans 10:1-17

**Key Verse:** If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9

## ROMANS 10:1-17 (NRSV UE)

- 1 Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.
- 2 For I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not based on knowledge.
- 3 Not knowing the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness.
- 4 For Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.
- 5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them."
- 6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down)
- 7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).
- 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim),
- 9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
- 10 For one believes with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation.
- 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."
- 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is

Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

13 For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

16 But not all have obeyed the good news, for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?”

17 So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

### **ROMANS 10:1-17 (KJV)**

1 Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.

2 For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

3 For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.

5 For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.

6 But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:)

7 Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.)

8 But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach;

9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

11 For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

12 For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him.

13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

14 How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?

15 And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!

16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?

17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

## KEY TERMS

- **Saved** – Salvation; redemption from sin.
- **Zeal** – A passion or enthusiasm for a belief (or thing).
- **Not According to Knowledge** – Not in line with the scriptures (or God's truth).
- **Abyss** – (verse 7, some versions) A literally bottomless pit; the grave.
- **Ignorance** – Not knowing truth; lack of knowledge.
- **Rituals** – Religious practices, prescribed services, and formalities; traditions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

As humans, we tend to follow the path of least resistance in life. We do not want to reinvent the wheel every time we want to go shopping. So, we follow the paths that others have set. This is particularly true in matters of religion. And while there is wisdom in this approach, there are also significant risks.

The major risk is the leaders we choose to follow can be wrong on certain key issues, because on occasions all they give us is what they received from the people they followed. To guard against this, some believers adopt the approach of the Bereans in Acts 17. The Bereans received Paul's message with eagerness, but took the extra step of proving the message against the scriptures. That way, they ensured they were not receiving a message purely on hysteria.

Why would this be important for us today? We see evidence that verses 2-3 of the text are still in play among us: people with zeal for God but ignorant of the character of God and his salvation provisions. And sadly, some of these super-religious people wreck not only their own lives, but the lives of people around them as well. Therefore, if this text does nothing else, it underscores the importance of sound faith doctrines.

## **TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

In a skillful way, in this text, Paul both summarized and expanded his argument on salvation by faith in Christ. He started (verses 1-4) with an assessment of where the Jews were on the salvation issue. By their

ignorance (or misunderstanding) of scripture and God, they had devised their own system of salvation and righteousness, which was contrary to God's. This had to be a massive punch to the heart of the Jews. There was no nice way to tell them they were practicing a corrupt form of self-righteousness.

To get the full impact of verse 5, we must read it in a modern translation. Here is the NLT version: "For Moses writes that the law's way of making a person right with God requires obedience to all of its commands." This is a statement we should all underline. Start by accepting that the law was not Moses' law. It was God's law given to Moses. Hence, the law did have a profile of righteousness. But here is the catch, as noted in the verse. To attain that righteousness by the law, a person had to keep strictly all the provisions of the law. This was an impossible task, although the Pharisees pretended to achieve it.

So, why did God do it that way? Some commentators suggest that the purpose of the law was to define sin and put people in a holding pattern until the real Lamb (Jesus Christ) came to offer the perfect sacrifice. It is a view worth considering.

Now follow the tempo of the passage as it leads from verse 5 to verse 10. Pay special attention to verse 8. In comparison with the Jew's elaborate system of atonement and righteousness, Paul's version of grace by faith was simple. And that was the problem. Even today we see it.

As humans, we love complicated religious rituals. They give us the

satisfaction of doing something significant to impress God. Further, the practice of such rituals gives us yardsticks by which we can measure relative righteousness. The person who keeps the rituals best gets the praise of being the best person (most holy or most righteous). We must guard against this even today.

Paul's quotation of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (Romans 10:6-8) proved his point of the Jews' ignorance (not understanding their own scriptures). In that Old Testament passage, God called people to reconcile with him, not through complicated rituals, but by the simple means of confession and belief. What the Jews of Paul's era missed was that the redeemer had already completed his ministry of our reconciliation with the Father (from incarnation to resurrection). All that is required for us now is to trust in the completed work of Christ. There is no need for further sacrifices and related works.

How Paul dealt with belief and confession in the text (verse 10:10) can be confusing to some readers. He did not intend to make them two independent, unrelated acts. On the contrary, he intended to show them as two related acts with one flowing out of the other. In fact, what Paul did was to highlight what psychologists readily teach: that our actions flow naturally from the core beliefs in the heart. This is the same point James made (James 2:14-17) in relation to the connection between our faith and the actions it produces. Maybe this is the motivation behind that little Sunday school chorus song which says, "If you are saved, and you know it,

say amen.”

In verses 12-13 Paul returned to a point he had explained in earlier chapters: all persons everywhere can reconcile with God by faith in Jesus Christ. This must have been sweet music in the ears of the Gentiles. And we could sympathize with the devout Jews who found this a bitter pill to swallow. It shook the foundation of the religious system on which they had built their hope for righteousness.

And here is where it can get tricky for us. Paul was calling on the Jews to change from their traditional beliefs of salvation by the law, to a salvation of grace by faith. Today our struggle is the reverse. We must now stand firm in that (traditional) grace by faith doctrine, and guard it against the “new doctrines” and “new revelations” which some social media evangelists peddle.

## **SANKOFA**

On a trip to England some years ago, we met Marilyn (not her real name), a Nigerian who had converted from Islam to Christianity late in life. There are two things that struck us about Marilyn. First, she had a knock-you-down smile, and she was always smiling. At the slightest crack of a joke, Marilyn would smile and sometimes break out in a laugh. Soon all of us would be laughing.

The second thing was her passion for Christ and Christianity. It was as if she was trying to make up for the years she spent as a Muslim. She was ready to share the Gospel of Christ with everyone who would stop long enough to hear her. However a conversation started with Marilyn, she found a way to insert Christ and/or Christianity into it.

We can only imagine, but it is safe to assume that some of the new converts to Christianity in Paul's day were like Marilyn. They were eager to spread their new-found faith to grace salvation. And the text of the book of Acts supports this assumption. The rapid rate at which the early church grew after Pentecost backs the view that new converts spread their faith with zeal.

So where are we today in zeal for the Gospel and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ? Do we still have that eagerness and passion to tell people about Christ and salvation by faith? We will come back to this in the **Life Application** segment.

## CASE STUDY

Above, we noted the love some people have for elaborate religious rituals. That love may induce religious leaders to subject people to a long, complex salvation conversion process. Such processes may be linked to membership of individual churches (organizations). This can be both good and bad.

When used wisely, religious rituals can serve a useful purpose. Social science researchers verified this usefulness in various studies over the years. The report of one study, "Religious upbringing linked to better health and well-being during early adulthood," from the Harvard School of Public Health, should excite parents and religious leaders. This report said, in part, "The results showed that people who attended religious services at least weekly in childhood and adolescence were approximately 18% more likely to report higher happiness as young adults (ages 23-30) than those who never attended services. They were also 29% more likely to volunteer in

their communities and 33% less likely to use illicit drugs.”

That report shouts great news for parents and church leaders who lament the scourge of drug abuse and lawlessness in our communities. Such reports make a strong case for religious rituals and discipline in the community of faith. So, what then can be wrong with the rituals and discipline some churches maintain?

The answer is simply nothing, if the leaders do not link the rituals and system of discipline to the salvation status of the people. Maybe sometimes it is unintentional, but members can be made to feel their salvation is in jeopardy because of their failure to keep certain rituals. This is a repeat of what the Pharisees practiced and both Jesus and Paul condemned.

Based on this text and related scripture, salvation is simply a matter of a person’s acceptances of God’s grace by faith and confession in Jesus Christ. So, what is the conclusion of this matter? Religious leaders must be careful not to link, or appear to link, members’ salvation to participation in rituals. Members, for their part, must be clear that their salvation is simply a matter of accepting God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

We respect that every institution has rules for good governance. However, being a “good member” and being “saved” are two worlds apart. The Pharisees scored high marks and admiration for their keeping of religious rules. However, based on Jesus’ rebukes, they were light years away from eternal life. Let us say it loud. Religiosity and salvation are not interchangeable. And one cannot be used to enforce the other. As believers, we

must zealously guard the salvation we got solely by faith in Jesus Christ. Only faith in Jesus Christ saves and sustains our hope for God's favor and eternal life.

## LIFE APPLICATION

In the **Sankofa** segment, we touched on the passion of new converts. From casual observations, it seemed believers lose their fire for sharing the Gospel message and telling their conversion story as time moves on. How does this apply to you? Think back to that time when the angels stood on the balcony of heaven and cheered your decision to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Look at what has happened in your life since that day.

Look at it this way. When we get a bargain in a store or online, we are eager to tell our friends and family about it and to promote the store. The same thing happens when we see a super exciting movie or dine at a fantastic fine dining restaurant. There are restaurants we still recommend to friends even though we dined there many years ago.

The same should happen with our salvation. If we consider our salvation the greatest bargain of life, we would still be excited about it. That excitement would lead us to want to share the bargain that God offers through faith in Jesus Christ. Consider where you are on the excitement meter, and what you can do to fan the flames of excitement.

Apart from the excitement factor, reviewing your salvation story has added advantages. Looking at how you came to Christ, and your previous

resistance to the salvation offer, can inform you of what others are experiencing. Some sinners are side-stepping the salvation offer for the same reasons you side-stepped it initially. Let this information guide you on the strategies you can use to pass the resistance barriers people put up to block accepting God's offer of friendship.

Consider what the people who tried to evangelize you and failed could have done differently to capture your interest and acceptance. Reviewing your personal salvation story can be a great training tool to sharpen your evangelism skills. Also, consider salvation as a one-point completed event versus salvation as a process of maturing in Christ. Do this by pulling Philippians 2:12 beside the text. God accepts us into the divine family the moment we accept his offer of salvation by faith in Christ. That is the one-point completed event.

However, growing in Christ (putting on the mind of Christ) takes time. That is the process. When we appreciate this difference, it gives us patience with ourselves and others. That appreciation stops us from demanding perfection in behavior from ourselves and from others. It helps us to realize that every believer is in a growth process. The most we can hope for is to see growth (increasing maturity) in our faith walk and the *Fruit of the Spirit* as time moves on.

## QUESTIONS

1. What impact does remembering your salvation story have on your walk of faith?

2. Why do believers lose interest in sharing their faith with others over time?
3. Paul said that the Jews had a “zeal for God but not according to knowledge.” In what forms do we still see this today?

## **CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

**Closing Hymn:** “He Hideth My Soul”

**Closing Prayer:** Mysterious maker, there are things about you and how you deal with us that I do not understand. But Lord, in my times of confusion, in whatever way is right for me, lead me to your truths about myself, about you, and about my relationship with you. This I ask in the name of Jesus, who I accept as my Savior. Amen.

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

**May 27–June 2**

**Monday** Isaiah 43:8-13 (God’s Witnesses)

**Tuesday** Psalm 113 (Praise the Lord!)

**Wednesday** Galatians 3:19-29 (God’s Children in Christ Through Faith)

**Thursday** Proverbs 10:19-25 (The Lord’s Blessing Makes Rich)

**Friday** Matthew 6:19-24 (Your Treasure Is With Your Heart)

**Saturday** Matthew 6:25-34 (Seek First God’s Kingdom)

**Sunday** Colossians 1:24–2:3 (Christ, the Most Precious Gift)

