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Acts 2.¹⁴⁻²¹

¹⁴But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, “Ye men of Judæa, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: ¹⁵for these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. ¹⁶But this is that which was spoken by the prophet a Joel;

¹⁷And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God,

I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh:
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams:

¹⁸And on my servants and on my handmaidens
I will pour out in those days of my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy:

¹⁹And I will shew wonders in heaven above,
and signs in the earth beneath;
blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:

²⁰The sun shall be turned into darkness,
and the moon into blood,

before that great and notable day of the Lord come:

²¹And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Meditation 1

This meditation is the first of a series of meditations devoted to the earliest Christian sermons as found in the Book of Acts. This sermon, found in Acts 2.¹⁴⁻³⁶, was the very first recorded sermon of the 1st century A.D. Christian church. Peter delivered this sermon on the day of Pentecost, just fifty days after Jesus’ death and resurrection, to an audience that witnessed Jesus’ disciples speaking “with other tongues” (Acts 2.⁴). In this meditation, we have a look at the first half of this sermon.

We observe, first, that this very first of all recorded Christian sermons begins with a quotation from the Hebrew Bible—specifically, Joel 2.²⁸⁻³². This observation serves to remind us that these first Christians were Jews, and that, as Jews, they saw themselves and the movement of which they were a part as a continuation of the Jewish tradition with the sacred Hebrew writings as a standard of truth and proof of their movement’s inspiration.

It also reminds us, more generally and more importantly, of the centrality of scripture in the disciple’s life and in their messaging of truth to others. Scripture is the standard. It begins and ends all our religious thoughts, speculations, beliefs, and teachings. It is impossible to calculate the value of scripture and all that we can learn and do through the instruction God so mercifully offers therein. But, here are a few that stand out to me.

Scripture provides insights into the meaning of events that occur in our lives. It provides warning against the many and varied spiritual dangers that infest this mortal existence. It bears witness to the existence and incomparable character of God. It testifies that this incomparable God is aware of and interested in human affairs—large and small, individual and societal. It bears witness that this incomparable God feels a deep love and commitment to those who inhabit this earth and that He willingly, happily, and intimately involves Himself in human affairs. He lives and involves Himself in their lives in hopes of advancing and improving their lives, both here and beyond. He reveals Himself and His character so that we might know what it is He wants and intends to make of us.

It is impossible to overestimate the value and importance of scripture in and to our lives. Beyond doubt, scripture is truly one of the greatest gifts God has bestowed upon mortals. His bestowal of this gift is one of the greatest of all God's acts of mercy, grace, and love. In Peter's early use of scripture as justification for the new movement's existence and proof of its power, it seems to us, Peter recognizes and reinforces the importance of the word of God. This reminds us that, in like manner, the Lord's latter-day work is built on scripture and the impact it had on one young boy's search to know his "state and standing before God" and what God would have him do and with the life God had granted him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

This meditation is the second of a series of meditations devoted to the earliest Christian sermons as recorded in the Book of Acts. This sermon, found in Acts 2.¹⁴⁻³⁶, was the very first recorded sermon of the 1st century A.D. Christian church. Peter delivered this sermon on the day of Pentecost, just fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, to an audience that witnessed Jesus' disciples speaking "with other tongues" (Acts 2.⁴). In this meditation, we have a look at the first half of the sermon.

In our first meditation we found it significant that the very first recorded Christian sermon relied heavily on scripture as evidence of the new movement's legitimacy and power. We suggested that this reliance on scripture can serve as example to all of us. Scripture should be the basis of all our private religious thinking and all the religious messaging in which we engage with others.

In this meditation, we want to consider the specific scripture that Peter quoted at the very beginning of Christianity's history of preaching. It was a sizable and multi-cultural multitude that witnessed simple, back-water Galileans speaking in tongues in such a manner that all understood their words regardless of their language. All who witnessed this wonder were "amazed and marvelled." There were some who mocked (See Acts 2.⁷⁻¹³).

Peter expresses his own wonderment at the multitude's amazement. Had not the prophet, Joel, spoken centuries earlier of God's willingness and ability to reveal himself to and through any individual and all classes of people: male and female, young and old, bond and free? Indeed, Jesus' entire ministry was a confirmation of this prophetic insight. He revealed the nature of God through the unclean leper and the deaf and the blind and the possessed and the sinner, even sinners whose sins were many. He found revelations and sermons in mere babes, in those who candidly and openly confessed their sinfulness, in publicans, in gentiles who believed he could heal their loved ones from a distance, in widows who paid a meager tithe of a single mite, in thieves hanging on crosses next to him, and in many others. As for Peter, not long after his first recorded sermon, he would extend God's ministry to gentiles, who would reveal things about God never before imagined

Yes, Jesus' disciples of all periods have often resisted the expansive nature of God's inclusiveness. It was no time at all before Paul was silencing women, a desire that has raised and continues to raise its ugly head over and over in ways extreme and subtle. God's people have and do constantly attempt to tame and domesticate God by restricting those through whom God can and does speak and act. But God will not be tamed. He is constantly expanding the groups through whom he reveals his expansive and inclusive character. It is highly likely that he is not finished yet. Our challenge is to accept God's own expansive inclusiveness without wonder and certainly without ridicule, and then go and do likewise.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 3

Many foreign visitors to Jerusalem were “amazed and marvelled” when they heard, in their own language, simple, uneducated Galileans’ preach the word of God “with other tongues” (Acts 2.⁴). But Peter reminded them that they ought not to wonder at God’s ability to use these “hicks,” because God had revealed centuries earlier that he was able and willing to use people of all types and classes—male and female, young and old, bond and free—to reveal Himself and His ways. This reminder, as the initial statement of the first recorded Christian sermon, might serve to clue listeners then and readers now into one of the central purposes of Jesus and a Christianity that is true to him: expansion of salvation to far wider audiences and inclusion of heretofore excluded populations in the promulgation of that message of expansion and inclusion.

But, all of that was not to say that there were not reasons for amazement and marvelment at the labors of God in behalf of human salvation and advancement. God had warned centuries earlier that, as always, those who kept a watch on God should expect “wonders” and “signs.” They would be seen throughout nature and the cosmos.

“And I will shew wonders in heaven above,
and signs in the earth beneath.”

Nothing was or is too big or too small for God to use to send messages and to save. We are particularly interested in God’s “wonders” and “signs” as instruments of deliverance. Although it is a short list, Joel’s “blood, and fire, and vapour” and “darkness,” it seems, should send one’s mind back thousands of years to Moses and the “signs” and “wonders” God used to deliver Israel from Egyptian oppression and slavery. Through his quotation of Joel with Joel’s allusion to Moses and the “signs” and “wonders” that were central to his mission of deliverance, Peter reminds his hearers that there are still oppressive powers on earth and in heaven that seek to hamper, capture, ensnare, and enslave those who would follow God. In addition, he reminds them that God intended to undermine those oppressive powers and deliver those who seek Him from those oppressive powers. And he would do so, as so often, with “signs” and “wonders.”

So, the reality of God’s deliverance through “signs” and “wonders” was true in the time of Moses. It was true in Joel’s day. It was true, as we will see in the following verses, in Jesus’ day. It was true in Peter’s day. Indeed, it was and is true in every day, including our own. There are still, today, cosmic powers and earthly powers inspired by them that oppress and seek to enslave and destroy. But God will, as he did to Egypt, undo all their machinations through “signs” and “wonders.”

“And verily I say unto you, the rest of my servants, go ye forth as your circumstances shall permit, in your several callings, unto the great and notable cities and villages, reproving the world in righteousness of all their unrighteous and ungodly deeds, setting forth clearly and understandingly the desolation of abomination in the last days. For, with you saith the Lord Almighty, I will rend their kingdoms; I will not only shake the earth, but the starry heavens shall tremble” (DC 84.¹¹⁷⁻¹¹⁸).

“And thus, with the sword and by bloodshed the inhabitants of the earth shall mourn; and with famine, and plague, and earthquake, and the thunder of heaven, and the fierce and vivid lightning

also, shall the inhabitants of the earth be made to feel the wrath, and indignation, and chastening hand of an Almighty God, until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations..." (DC 87.⁶).

I don't know about you, but the current state of earthly affairs grows increasingly intolerable making me feel that it is time for the "consumption decreed." I am under no illusions that it will be easy or pleasant or comfortable. It will not be pretty. I expect to feel the hard times as much as the next person. Nevertheless, I know in whom I trust. I hope to be one of those who "call on the name of the Lord" and are saved by Him, even if it so be through "signs" and "wonders."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Acts 3.¹²⁻¹⁸

¹²And when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, “Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? Or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. ¹⁴But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; ¹⁵and killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. ¹⁶And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. ¹⁷And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.

meditation

If we return to this subject over and over again, it is because scripture itself returns to this subject over and over again. Clearly, it is of utmost importance. Clearly it is necessary. Clearing it is reflective of a common and persistent misunderstanding and problem.

This second recorded Christian sermon was delivered in the temple precincts and was occasioned by Peter and John healing a man “lame from his mother's womb.”¹ We do not know how old the man was at the time, but the Greek word used to describe him, *anér*, often refers to an adult male of marriageable age. We are informed that he was “laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful.” Though we are uncertain as to the exact location of this gate, it must have been a well-traveled gate and the man must have taken up his station there for quite some time for “all the people” inside the temple, when they saw him “walking, and leaping, and praising God,” “knew that it was he which sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple.”

This first recorded Christian healing, then, was impressive and undeniable. Peter had chosen to heal someone conspicuous, rather than someone whose need might be questionable either in regard to severity or duration. Those who saw the man walking and came to understand who was responsible for his healing were rightly “filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him.” However, they were not right in the object of their “wonder and amazement.”

Peter recognized their error and responded to it right away: “Why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?” This immediate desire to deflect attention from themselves and toward Jesus reminds us of the writer of the Gospel of John and his determination to deflect his readers’ attention from John the Baptist. “He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light² reported the Gospel writer. And then a few short verses later, the same author reported the Baptist’s own deflection of attention from himself to Jesus.

“I am not the Christ... He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.”³

So, after being sure that his audience understood that the power and holiness necessary to heal the well-known man did not reside within himself, Peter, like the Baptist, pointed their minds to the One

¹ Acts 3.¹⁻¹¹

² John 1.⁸

³ John 1.^{21, 27}

upon whom their “wonder and amazement” was warranted: “the Holy One and the Just,” the murdered One, the “Prince of life,” the One God raised from the dead, God’s Son, Jesus. It was this man’s name, and belief in this man’s power that “made this man strong” and gave him “this perfect soundness.”

It is understandable, I suppose, for the spiritually immature to become fixated on the humans that appear right before their eyes rather than “the King eternal, immortal, *invisible*, the only wise God.”⁴ But it is no less unwise and dangerous for its understandable-ness. Little wonder, then, that fully one-third of the second recorded Christian sermon was devoted to rectifying the common and dangerous misplacement of human “wonder and amazement,” diverting the human “wonder and amazement” from visible yet insufficient human beings to the infinitely sufficient invisible One. Little wonder, too, that scripture so often addressed this human tendency to misplace religious “wonder and amazement.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁴ Timothy 1.¹⁷

Acts 5.²⁹⁻³²

²⁹Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, “We ought to obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. ³¹Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give [to gift, endow, grant] repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

Meditation

Excuse me for feeling, sometimes, that the principal role religion plays in many individuals’ lives is that of masking insecurities and establishing a (false) sense of superiority over others. This psychology is certainly seen in the Zoramites’ obscene prayer. We can sometimes be a little like that parabolic Pharisee who, looking down his nose at the Publican, prayed: “Granting that I sinned, I thank thee, O God, that I was wise enough to repent, unlike so many others who either will not grant that they sinned or will not repent.” It is, almost, as if, having repented, we come to think that we invented and initiated our repentance. As if our repentance were our own creation.

Now, we all know, or at least should, and readily and humbly acknowledge that God’s act of forgiving us is an act of grace. It is a divine gift. God invented the possibility. He did this through Jesus, who brought it into being. We do not create it, we are gifted it. Neither can we “buy” it. We do not possess sufficient resources.

But we do sometimes forget that not only is forgiveness, the result of repentance, a gift from God, but that the very possibility of repenting is itself a Divine gift. Without God’s gifting us repentance, we would not be able to repent even if we wanted to. We need God to open the door to the possibility of repentance before we can pass through that door. Indeed, God must bring us to the door, otherwise we never know it even exists.

But there is more. Repentance means “to change one’s mind (*noûs*),” which, in view of the many senses of *noûs*, might mean ‘to adopt another view,’ ‘to change one’s feelings’.... “If the change of mind derives from recognition that the earlier view was foolish, improper or evil, there arises the sense ‘to regret,’ ‘to feel remorse,’ ‘to rue’” (*TDNT*). Of course, such changes in view and feelings along with the sense of regret, often lead to a change in behavior. We often like to take credit for this change in attitude and behavior. After all, did we not exert our own personal will-power? A little. Maybe.

But again such an attitude reveals our blindness. How did we come to see an alternative to our previous world view? Did we create the better world view? Did we imagine it out of the recesses of our finite mind? No, of course not. Someone, God. Himself, or a someone ultimately enlightened by God, suggested a better way. Without the Divine introduction of a better way, we would go right on thinking, viewing, feeling, and acting as we did before.

Lent is a time of repentance with an eye toward forgiveness. To whatever humble degree we may “succeed,” by far, the greater share of the credit goes to God the Father, His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They are authors and finishers of our faith (See Heb. 12.²). The story is theirs, not ours. They, not us, are the heroes of the story of repentance and forgiveness.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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Acts 7.²⁻⁸

²And he said, ‘Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, ³and said unto him, ‘Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.’

⁴Then came he out of the land of the Chaldæans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. ⁵And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child. ⁶And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years. ⁷‘And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge,’ said God: ‘and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.’ ⁸And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.

Meditation

In offering his defense against blasphemy, Stephen reminded his prosecutors of the command that God issued to Abraham: “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.” This voluntary exodus from the wicked comforts of home is a common, indeed, persistent feature of God’s people.

The most famous exodus, of course, is found in the Book of the same name. “But,” one might object, “Israel’s exodus from Egypt was not an exodus ‘from the wicked comforts of home,’ but from wicked Egyptian slavery.” True enough. Yet, once Israel had left what had been their home for generations, they soon forgot the wickedness of Egyptian slavery because of the difficulty of following God’s path to a better land and society.

“And the children of Israel said unto [Moses and Aaron], ‘Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’”¹

“We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: but now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes.”²

Leaving home behind, even a bad, wicked home, to pursue a home in keeping with the Lord’s principles is hard work that often entails great personal sacrifice.

Generations later, the people of Israel found themselves enmeshed in the Babylonian captivity. One might think that the captives would be chomping at the bits to get out and return home. One would not think there would be any need for a command to leave. Yet...

“Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord.”³

Yet, even here, Babylon had become home for many. Even after the command/ invitation to leave,

¹ Exodus 16.³

² Numbers 11.⁵⁻⁶

³ Isaiah 52.¹¹

many, the majority even, choose to stay in Babylon.

The Book of Mormon is a history of one exodus after another. There is the original exodus from Jerusalem found in 1 Nephi. Many, perhaps a majority, of those commanded to leave the wicked comforts of home were not happy campers.

“They did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness...”⁴

“They were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem.”⁵

⁶“It would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions. Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy.”

Yes, leaving sin and wickedness behind is difficult, often uncertain work. Yet, just as he called ancient Israel to do it, and Lehi, and Nephi,⁷ and Mosiah,⁸ and Alma,⁹ he called latter-day “saints” to do it. The danger of wickedness seems to always be lurking where the comfort of home is. And it was no different for the early “saints.” Danger and wickedness lurked everywhere in 18th century America. So, the “saints” were commanded to leave.

“Wherefore, prepare ye, prepare ye, O my people; sanctify yourselves; gather ye together, O ye people of my church, upon the land of Zion, all you that have not been commanded to tarry. Go ye out from Babylon. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord... Yea, verily I say unto you again, the time has come when the voice of the Lord is unto you: Go ye out of Babylon; gather ye out from among the nations, from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”¹⁰

They tried. But like so many before them, they couldn’t let go the comfortable wickedness of home. The society God intended to establish asked for too much. It was too difficult.

“Behold, I say unto you, there were jarrings, and contentions, and envyings, and strifes, and lustful and covetous desires among them; therefore by these things they polluted their inheritances.”¹¹

So, they were exiled from Zion and made to dwell in the desert. I’ll let the reader decide whether they have done any better in the desert home of the past hundred and seventy years.

So, I think of all this “getting out” as I contemplate the opening lines of Stephen’s defense. In speaking of Abraham’s “getting out” of his country, Steven wasn’t, I believe, simply “doing history.” I sense that he was speaking in parable. He, like many before and after him, had come to the

⁴ 1 Nephi 2.¹¹

⁵ 1 Nephi 7.⁷

⁶ 1 Nephi 17.²⁰⁻²¹

⁷ 2 Nephi 5.⁵

⁸ Omni 1.¹²

⁹ Alma 18.³⁴

¹⁰ DC 133.^{4-5, 7}

¹¹ DC 101.⁶

conclusion that Jesus' followers were going to have to "get out." They were going to need to turn from their Jewish traditions and begin their own independent Christian traditions; for Jewish religious and political leaders were, as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other Hebrew prophets lamented, had become little different from the nation's original Egyptian overlords.

The Lord made the same determination about America in the 18th century. It was not a place where disciples of Jesus could dwell comfortably. I, for one, have made the same determination in this, the 21st century. America is a dangerously wicked place. A new version of Babylon. Its wickedness is a danger to all who remain. I hear the call renewed, "Go ye out from Babylon." This going out is certainly mental and emotional and spiritual. It may be physical as well, for all I know. But, whether mental or physical, our going out must, as always, be accomplished without resorting to violence.¹² But get out we must. Our spiritual lives depend on it. But, maybe, even our physical lives depend on it.

"For behold, and lo, vengeance cometh speedily upon the ungodly as the whirlwind; and who shall escape it? The Lord's scourge shall pass over by night and by day, and the report thereof shall vex all people; yea, it shall not be stayed until the Lord come; for the indignation of the Lord is kindled against their abominations and all their wicked works."¹³

"And thus, with the sword and by bloodshed the inhabitants of the earth shall mourn; and with famine, and plague, and earthquake, and the thunder of heaven, and the fierce and vivid lightning also, shall the inhabitants of the earth be made to feel the wrath, and indignation, and chastening hand of an Almighty God, until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations..."¹⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹² See DC 63.²⁹⁻³¹

¹³ DC 97.²²⁻²⁴

¹⁴ DC 87.⁶

Romans 1.¹⁸⁻²³

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; ¹⁹because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.

²⁰For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

²¹because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, ²³and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

meditation

After greeting the Romans and expressing his frustration at not having yet been able to visit them in person (1.¹⁻¹⁵), Paul launches into his primary thesis: what he sees as the most fundamental human problem (1.¹⁶-3.²⁰). He succinctly lays out the problem in 3.⁹: “Both Jews and Gentiles... are all under sin.” And, again in 3.²³, “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” It is this truth that Paul begins to establish at 1.¹⁶.

In this reading, Paul identifies the first and foundational human sin: idolatry. All other sins find their genesis in the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is rather like a virus. It is the disease. All other sins are but symptoms of the disease rather than the disease itself. One can treat the symptoms. But the disease remains.

Idolatry is a complex human phenomenon, requiring more discussion than we have time for in a brief meditation. Paul himself does not explore all its facets, here or elsewhere. In discussing idolatry, Paul emphasizes its error of replacing a perfect God with imperfect ones. These imperfect gods take many forms, but each god is made in the image of creatures rather than the actual creator. Ultimately, gods are made in the image of human beings. Humans become the highest ideal. Humans and the institutions they create take the place of the true and living God in the hearts and minds of mortals. Humans foolishly trust the arm of flesh and the institutions it creates to bring happiness and security. Flawed beings and institutions are allowed to set expectations of what is good and what is evil. All sorts of flawed attitudes and behaviors flow from and are justified through the false and flawed gods and their institutions.

Paul will go on to describe some of the false attitudes and evil behaviors that flow from the worship of flawed gods. But, Paul does not leave us in this state of ignorance. He suggests that there is a way out. And so, after establishing the universality of human sin that flows from incorrect ideas about God, Paul will turn his attention to what he sees as the solution to this fundamental human problem (3.²¹-5.²¹): Jesus Christ. Jesus is a revelation of God. In him, God’s true nature is revealed. Those who accept Jesus’ revelation find themselves freed from idolatry’s evil attitudes and behaviors. They are forgiven their past dalliances with sin, are shown the higher hopes that God has for humankind both here and in eternity, and are directed and empowered to live such as to achieve Divinity’s high hopes for it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Romans 5.⁶⁻¹¹

⁶For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. ⁸But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

meditation

In this passage, it seems to me, Paul wishes to instill in us a sense of wonder about the extreme generosity of soul that Jesus possesses. In seeking us out to save us, he goes far, far beyond human norms and far beyond what we would expect. Humans go to war with those who act contrary to their interests. By the billions, humans have killed other humans with whom they were at enmity. Wrath has reigned between nations and individuals. To be sure, humans haven't gone out of the way to make life more pleasant for their enemies. They haven't been willing to die for their enemies, but to bring death to their enemies.

But Jesus acted exactly opposite to these human norms.

I am sometimes disappointed and saddened to see that some of our doctrines cause some to lose the sense of wonder at Jesus' generosity—doctrines surrounding a pre-mortal life, for example, or God's omniscience, or our alleged basic goodness. These sometimes make us feel that since he knew us beforehand and supposedly knew what we would do with the message of Christ and his atonement, he wasn't really going out on that much of a limb to love us, to offer himself to us, and to save us.

But, it isn't like Paul didn't believe in the omniscience of God. He was all too aware of the brazen ungodliness of humanity. Still, he was filled with a sense of wonder at and gratitude for the near profligate generosity God feels for and extends to us. When we come to realize that he, through suffering and death, offers himself to us as companion, friend, and savior even when we are at our very worst, we are drawn to him. Far from avoiding him due to shame, we seek his loving embrace. It is only in entering his embrace that we can hope to become something closer to our very best. Oh, yes, it is a wonder!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Romans 8.³¹⁻³⁴

³¹What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? ³²He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

³³Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

³⁴Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

meditation

As we briefly noted in our *meditation* based on Luke 24.⁵⁰⁻⁵³, to detail the activities by which Jesus “wrought” the Atonement through suffering and death, and then ending it with resurrection, is to leave things unfinished. Without ascension and enthronement at the right hand of God, his infinite and eternal Atonement remains incomplete. The latter are as essential to Atonement as the former.¹

Sitting enthroned at the right hand of God as Jesus does, all “angels and authorities and powers” are, according to Peter’s language, “subject unto him” (See Pet. 3.²²). In the thought and language of Paul, in setting Jesus “at his own right hand in the heavenly places,” God had given him power “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.” God had “put all things under his feet...” (See Eph. 1.¹⁹⁻²²).

There are, scripture teaches, many angels, many authorities, many powers not only on this terrestrial planet but out there in the cosmos. Not all of them are benign. Some of them are downright evil, threatening, and deadly. One of those powers is a fallen angel, who bears the name, Lucifer. He is, certainly, a tempter. But he is also, according to John the Revelator’s testimony, “the accuser of our brethren... which accused them before our God day and night” (Rev. 12.¹⁰). No doubt, one of the temptations that the accuser uses is the temptation of hopeless self-recrimination. We often need protected from ourselves as much as we do from Satan. One author has said it like this.

“Satan is thus not merely a mythological character invented out of whole cloth; the ‘adversary’ is that actual inner or collective voice of condemnation that any sensitive person hears tirelessly repeating accusations of guilt or inferiority. And indeed, there is often a degree of truth in the charges. But Satan’s demand for strict justice, untempered by mercy, can crush the spirit of a person or a people” (Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, p. 12-13).

Accusation of and prosecution for guilt—imagined and real—are, indeed, threatening things from which we require protection. From his seat at the right hand of God, Jesus offers this protection, standing between us and “condemnation.” He plays the role of defender against inner and outer condemnation. Jesus himself spoke of this role in one of the most beloved Gospel passages.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
even so must the Son of man be lifted up:
That whosoever believeth in him should not perish,
but have eternal life.
For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.

¹ We have asserted elsewhere that, in fact, there is no activity in which Jesus engaged during his earthly ministry that is not, itself, an act of at-one-ment.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world;
but that the world through him might be saved.
He that believeth on him is not condemned:
but he that believeth not is condemned already,
because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (Jn. 3.¹⁴⁻¹⁸).

We see Jesus acting in this role as defender from guilt everywhere we turn. We see it in his earthly ministry. We hear tell of it in Paul’s writings. We hear tell of it in the Book of Mormon, nowhere more powerfully than in Alma.

He, it was, who “was racked with eternal torment... harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all [his] sins” (Al. 36.¹²). He it was who “cried within [his] heart: ‘O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.’” He it was who then “could remember [his] pains no more; yea, [he] was harrowed up by the memory of [his] sins no more. And oh, what joy,” he exclaims “and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!” (See Al 36.¹⁸⁻²⁰).

The latter-day Church had hardly emerged from the womb before its members found Jesus at it again. In a revelation given in April 1830, Jesus, on the self-same day, spoke to Oliver Cowdery, Hyrum Smith, Samuel Smith, and Joseph Smith, all of whom constituted about half the Church membership at the time. To Oliver, he said,

“Thou art blessed, and art under no condemnation.”

To Hyrum, he declared,

“Thou also art under no condemnation.”

To Samuel, he announced,

“Thou also art under no condemnation.”

And to Joseph, he repeated the now familiar refrain.

“Thou also art under no condemnation.”

This absence of “condemnation” was not due to there being no cause for condemnation. These men were not perfect. They were far from sinless. Rather, this absence of “condemnation” was the result of Jesus’ character and his acting in his role as defender. In Christ neither angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor dominions, nor ourselves can level a “charge” against “God’s elect.” Yea, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” Indeed, “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loves us” (Rom. 8.³⁷). We are citizens of the kingdom of God, as John sees in his great Apocalypse.

“And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: *for* the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night” (Rev. 12.¹⁰).

That is one huge three letter word: ‘for.’ “Salvation,” and “strength,” and “the kingdom of God,” and the “power of his Christ” are all found in casting down the accuser and annihilating all condemnation, all accusation, and all prosecution of guilt.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Romans 8.³⁵⁻³⁹

³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, “For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” ³⁷Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. ³⁸For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Meditation

Separation. It is not a good word. “It is not good for man to be alone.” Humans are not made to be separate. They are meant to be connected. At-one. They are meant to be connected to each other and they are meant to be connected to God.

In considering separation with God, Paul asks, really, a series of questions. First, he asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” This is a rhetorical question, expecting the answer, “No one.” Then Paul asks another question. This question, though, might be thought of as seven questions. We could format these seven questions as follows

“Shall tribulation separate us from the love of Christ?”
“Shall distress separate us from the love of Christ?”
“Shall persecution separate us from the love of Christ?”
“Shall famine separate us from the love of Christ?”
“Shall nakedness separate us from the love of Christ?”
“Shall peril separate us from the love of Christ?”
“Shall sword separate us from the love of Christ?”

Again, the questions are rhetorical with the anticipated answer being, “No.”

Paul is quite certain about this. No *one* and no *thing*—whether they exist in the present or the future, in this world or another—possesses the power to separate us from God’s love; a love that is most perfectly exemplified and expressed in the person of Jesus, in whom all the fullness of God dwells. Not,

Death
Life
Angels
Principalities
Powers
things present
things to come
height
depth
any other creature

No doubt, Paul’s list of enfeebled powers is not complete. Indeed, Paul’s earlier list of seven mortal experiences, and this list of ten enfeebled powers can be viewed as utilizing the two numbers associated in Hebrew with completion and perfection. There truly is nothing, nothing, nothing that can separate us from the love of Christ.

This is all very impressive. And true. And yet, we often personally feel separated from this enduring love. In the face of such power, how and from where does this sense of separation come? From inside us. Apparently, we are quite a power unto ourselves. We have the power to imagine the impossible—a distant, demanding god who is easily offended and finds it easy and appropriate to separate himself from us. Such vain imaginings come through selfish, near egomaniacal concentration on ourselves as we ignore that which God Himself has witnessed about His own unalterable character. This results in our creation of a god after the image of our own heart—small, petty, unreasonably demanding, etc.

But this detached god is not real. It is us, a false god. The solution? Turn our minds away from self and our egomania. Grind the false golden calf of self to powder, and focus more earnestly on the great I AM, the One and Only. The only One who is, truly, inseparably connected, and at-one with all creation. This witness of Christ, that God is unalterably at-one, inseparable and connected to us, is the message and power found in his own at-one-ment.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Corinthians 1.¹⁻³

¹Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ²unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: ³grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

meditation

Today's reading represents Paul's greeting to the Corinthian church. It is not only a fairly standard greeting for Paul, but it also contains elements of standard greetings of his day. It is not unusual for anyone, religious or not, to begin with an expression of grace toward the receiver. It is another way of saying, "Greetings." I would like to just comment on this idea of "grace" as "greeting."

Certainly, for Paul the word "grace" is loaded with all sorts of theological significance beyond the norm. It is at the heart of his gospel message. Nevertheless, in the word "grace," there is a basic and foundational idea of "greeting" and thus of acceptance. A greeting implies some contentment, happiness even in meeting another. To say, "greetings," or "hello," is a way of extending an accepting invitation of fellowship. When one says "grace" over a meal, it is their way of signaling their appreciation and thus acceptance of the blessings of the meal.

No doubt, in so greeting the Corinthian church, Paul was expressing his appreciation and acceptance of them. But, Paul is interested in and wishes the Corinthian saints to be aware of an acceptance, a grace, that is far more profound, much more life-altering than his.

"Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

Here, Paul extends a greeting that comes from the Father and Son. Here, Paul reminds the saints of Father and Son's gracious characters; of their accepting nature. He invites them to bask in the knowledge of God's acceptance and ready willingness to enter into happy fellowship with them. In coming to earth, Jesus, God the Son, serves as the perfect revelator of Father's intimate acceptance.

We often say that grace is God's enabling power. But this is not precisely correct, it seems to me. Grace is that which lives inside God. It is a fundamental element of his character. It is a divine attribute; the attribute of acceptance. Any enabling power we may receive from God flows out of our acceptance and experience of his acceptance of us. This experience of his acceptance does indeed empower us to feel and behave in ways that would otherwise remain closed to us. Indeed, only through experiencing God's accepting disposition do and can we become saints. Only then can individuals, knowing God's character, slowly grow in imitating him and taking upon themselves his attributes until, finally, when he appears, we shall be like him.

Oh, the joy of God's greeting!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Corinthians 1.⁴⁻⁹

⁴I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; ⁵that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; ⁶even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: ⁷so that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: ⁸who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

meditation

After greeting the saints at Corinth, Paul reveals his hopes for the saints. He does so, as he often does in his epistles, by sharing his personal prayers and the things he asks God to bestow upon them (See Rom. 1.⁸⁻¹²; Eph. 1.¹⁵⁻²³; Phil. 1.³⁻⁵; Col. 1.³⁻⁶). Paul is not frivolous in his hopes. He is no small dreamer. He has big hopes and plans for us.

In today's reading, Paul hopes that Jesus "enriches" our "utterance" and "knowledge." It is not enough that we be given "utterance" and "knowledge." Oh, no. Our "utterance" and "knowledge" must be "enriched" before Paul is satisfied. Paul also prays that we "come behind in no gift." Again, it is not enough that we be given gifts. We must have them to their fullest. These are expansive hopes indeed?

In addition, Paul hopes that God, ever true to us (faithful), will strengthen us in our daily lives such that we can stand before Jesus "blameless." What a blessing! We are often so skilled at finding reasons to criticize and blame ourselves.

Paul has much to say to the Corinthians in this epistle. Before launching into his to-do list, however, Paul has one more thing to say: "Ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord." This brings us back to the "grace" that we discussed in our *Small, Simple Sermon* for 1.1-3. Jesus is accepting and welcoming. He invites those who hear of him to believe and receive and act boldly and trustingly upon the reality of his grace. We, like the Corinthians and like the Psalmist before them are invited, "Seek ye my face." Paul would have us respond,

"My heart said unto thee, "Thy face, LORD, will I seek."

In doing so, we will "behold the beauty of the LORD" (see Ps. 27.^{4, 8}).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 Corinthians 12.¹⁴⁻²⁷

Strange notions of diversity and unity

Today's meditation might more accurately be called a jeremiad.

Upon returning from a month long tour across the southern part of the subcontinent of India, I was interested to learn of the little dust up over Dallin Oak's here-today-gone-tomorrow video (unfortunately, he says and does nothing in it to earn the title "Elder," "Apostle," or "President") in which he seemed to poopoo diversity and any notion of the Lord's responsibility for, interest in, or use of diversity within the body of Christ.

"Jesus did not pray that his followers would be diverse," he intones. "He prayed that they would be one..."

His declaration is so knuckleheaded on so many fronts that it is hard to know where to even begin a discussion. Hearing his unfortunate declaration concerning diversity, unity, and the relationship between them, my wife wondered out loud, "What does that even mean?"

While I have some sympathy for my wife's sense that the declaration was nonsensical and off kilter, I nevertheless find significance in it. It seems to me an example of the quiet part being spoken out loud. I would be willing to bet that this ugly and inciting aphorism has been bandying about the echo chambers of the church's highest leadership councils for some time. In this rarified, artificial, and vanilla environment of self-perpetuation devoid of self-reflection, it has almost certainly reverberated back and forth with little or no resistance. But when tried out and uttered outside in the real world where such declarations enter rather than bounce off actual human beings it landed with a deafening thud rather than exalted echoes.

Enter the public affairs wizards to attempt a white wash.

I have little doubt that this and many other ugly assertions that seek to justify a host of institutional errors and defame those perceived as threats to the status quo bounce around uninhibited inside the carefully maintained echo chambers of church leadership. I would be willing to bet that, while those "who seem to be somewhat"¹ lament the decrease in new members entering and the increase in old members exiting, within the leadership echo chambers there is a wizened, self-satisfied, and self-righteous nod of the head that this decrease in coming and increase in going is, in the end, inevitable—simply a matter of prophecy being fulfilled: an increasing and clearer demarcation between the goats and the sheep, the wheat and the tares.

Convenient echo, this, since it allows the shouters to continue the status quo and avoid the sort of change that we call repentance and associate with progression. Here we recall that it was this same man who asserted that the church felt no need to apologize for past church errors—probably as much a dig at, say, the Catholic Church and its willingness to admit past errors as belligerent refusal to confess sin and error and ask for forgiveness. We also call to mind the church's passive, responsibility-avoiding "mistakes were made" rather than the active and accountable "we made mistakes" when addressing its twenty-year-long fraudulent and unethical investment practices that have recently come to light. Those who lead the

¹ See Galatians 2.⁶

church simply seem incapable and/ or unwilling to admit error and make godly confession of sin as God requires of disciples.²

Troubling, to say the least.

It is such maintenance of the status quo and avoidance of repentance and progression that Oak's latest howl concerning diversity seems intent on setting in concrete. But through scripture, we can easily identify the sophistry of his strange assertion and that has likely bounced about and then escaped the self-perpetuating echo chambers of the church's leading councils. We can call to mind scripture's insight that it is God, Himself, who appreciates, creates, and utilizes diversity.

“For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, “Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body;” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, “Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body;” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? *But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.*

And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, “I have no need of thee:” nor again the a head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but *God hath tempered the body together*, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.”³

If this is not a paean to diversity, I don't know what is.

“Jesus did not pray that his followers would be diverse,” but one, you say? Well duh. Of course, Jesus does not pray for diversity within the church. There is no need! He created diversity; built diversity into it from the very beginning! He is pleased with diversity. Finds it necessary. Mixes and combines diverse elements to form a healthy whole. Diversity keeps the more “valued” and “honorable” members—those such as Oaks?—from thinking more of themselves than they ought and allows the less valued members to think more of themselves than they are otherwise inclined to do.

“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.”⁴

And you do know, don't you, that diversity and unity are not mutually exclusive? That, in fact, they belong together, go hand in hand? All are profited; all are blessed through the diversity God makes and cherishes as part of His Kingdom. Diversity is fundamental to the advancement of the institutional church and its individual members.

Oak's sophistry rejects divinely ordained diversity and falsely characterizes unity and oneness. But the

² According to one GA's recent ridiculous assertion, one can replace the name of the church with “Jesus.” It is, then, disconcerting to witness mere humans fining Jesus for fraudulent financial practices.

³ 1 Corinthians 12.¹⁴⁻²⁷

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12.⁴⁻⁷

sophistry goes further. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, it defames those who laud diversity, suggesting that they are somehow uninterested in and even adverse to the idea of unity and oneness in Christ when, in fact, those who laud diversity actually assert that a recognition and respect for diversity is a key to unity and oneness. The sophistry is more than gaslighting. It is itself divisive and inciting. If left to stand, it will do as much as anything to create disunity.

Those who seem to be somewhat in the church seem to become ever more reactionary and irrational in their defense of a status quo that is increasingly indefensible. Here's hoping they can be constrained in their irrational reactionary impulses by something more than a bunch of hired public affairs professionals. Here's hoping they can find their way to humble acknowledgement of imperfection and error that leads to godly repentance.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Philippians 2.⁵⁻¹¹

⁵Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: ⁷but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. ⁹Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; ¹¹and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Meditation

Reputation. *Re-pyə-'tā-shən*: 1) “Overall quality or character as seen or judged by people in general;” 2) “recognition by other people of some characteristic;” 3) “a place in public esteem or regard, good name.”

We care very much about our reputation. Outside of our concern for the necessities of life our concern for reputation may be the greatest driver in how we live and how we present ourselves to others. Some would rather die than lose their “good name.” So, what do we make of Jesus, a man who cared not one whit about reputation? A man who lived as a slave and died on a cross with the reputation of a criminal? How do we follow him—for follow him we must? How do we accept and adopt his mindset?

Perhaps it helps to know that Jesus, without reputation, was, in the end, “highly exalted” and “given...a name which is above every name.” But I do not believe that Jesus was who he was because he was motivated by or sought after reward. Jesus was who he was because... well, that’s simply who he was.

As for me, I want to be like Jesus because... well, that’s the way to be. If I never get anything for it, so be it. Reputation, apparently, is over-rated, anyway. That said, no one holds a higher reputation in my mind than Jesus. I bow the knee to him every day. I very much look forward to the day when I can, in very deed, bow my knee and confess with my tongue for all the universe to hear that Jesus, the greatest of all, is “both Lord and Christ.”¹

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ Acts 2.³⁶

Colossians 1.¹²⁻²⁰

¹²Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: ¹³who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: ¹⁴in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:

¹⁵who is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of every creature:

¹⁶for by him were all things created,
that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible,
whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers:
all things were created by him, and for him:

¹⁷and he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church:
who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead;
that in all things he might have the preeminence.

¹⁹For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;

²⁰and, having made peace through the blood of his cross,
by him to reconcile all things unto himself;
by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

meditation

After a two verse greeting, Paul informed the Colossians saints of the prayers he offered to God in their behalf: the things that he thanked God for (verses 3-8), and the things he requested of God in their behalf (verses 9-14). In today's reading, we hear a continuation of his prayerful requests (verses 13-14) followed by what many believe to be the lyrics of an early Christian hymn (verses 15-20). This hymn is filled with superlatives about Jesus and the preeminence that he possesses.

Over and over again, early LDS missionaries were encouraged to preach boldly.

“And speak freely to all; yea, preach, exhort, declare the truth, even with a loud voice, with a sound of rejoicing, crying—‘Hosanna, hosanna, blessed be the name of the Lord God!’”¹

They were “at all times, and in all places” to “open [their] mouths” and let their preaching be performed “with the voice of a trumpet, both day and night.” They were never, the Lord stipulated, to “suppose that ye can say enough in my cause.”²

Certainly, they could never spend too much time or energy in proclaiming the blessedness of the name of the Lord God. But, neither would they be able to say enough about God, Himself, His character, and His cause. No matter how lofty their rhetoric may become, they would inevitably have failed to capture the grandeur of God. They would have sold him short. The subject was simply too expansive, far beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend or the human tongue to describe or characterize. Nobody captured the impossibility of adequately describing God better than the great Nephite missionary, Ammon. In what is my favorite passage among many favorites, he confessed,

“Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can

¹ DC 19.³⁷

² See DC 24.¹⁰⁻¹²

say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”³

But none of this keeps us from trying. And trying and trying.

In today’s text, we see Paul making a valiant attempt. The apostle loves the saints of Colossae. He thanks God for them, for his association with them, and for their faithful response to the glad tidings he had brought them. He pleads in prayer for them. He asks that they understand God and His desires for them. He asks that God bestow upon them a power akin to His own so that they might walk worthily and endure joyfully. He pleads that they will always feel the holy desire to express their thanks to an unfathomably generous God.

All of this brings us to our superlatives. A superlative word is one that indicates “the highest quality or degree.”

‘Kind.’ ‘Kinder.’ **‘KINDEST.’**

‘Good.’ ‘Better.’ **‘BEST.’**

As Paul contemplates the praise that the saints might express to God, a hymn comes to his mind. He recites it. This hymn is chock-full of superlatives. Jesus is “the *beginning*.” There’s a superlative for you. What is before the beginning? Nothing. The beginning is... well, the beginning.

Similarly, Jesus is “*before* all things.” In fact, we might call this one a double superlative: “*before all* things.” Is there something more, greater than *all*? Something “before” the “before”?

Jesus is “the firstborn.” Another superlative. No one is born before the “firstborn.” But even this superlative is not enough. It must be strengthened if it is to capture the grandeur of Jesus. Jesus is the “*firstborn of every* creature.” Though it may seem redundant, there’s another superlative: every. That pretty much covers the gamut, wouldn’t you say?

Jesus is “the head.” The head sits on top of the body. There is no part of the body that is higher.

And how about that “*all fulness*” for redundancy. One would think “fulness” would do the trick. Can something be fuller than full? But, no, something more is necessary: “it pleased the Father than in him should *all fulness* dwell.” The Father could not pack more of Himself into Jesus than he did. He is all in there.

“For in him [Christ] dwelleth *all the fulness* of the Godhead bodily.”⁴

Well, we get the point, I think. Jesus is preeminent. Yes, the hymn used that word too! “Preeminent.” “That in *all things* he might have the *preeminence*.” Now the hymnists is just showing off, piling up the superlatives, one on top another. He uses the superlative “all” seven times—seven signifying perfection. Jesus is perfectly and completely superlative and preeminent.

Then again, the “all things” runs like a refrain throughout the passage. “By him were all things created.” “All things... that are in heaven.” “All things... that are in the earth.” All things... visible and invisible.” Indeed, as we have seen, he is “before *all things*.” By him “*all things* consist.” “In *all*

³ Alma 26.¹⁶

⁴ Col. 2.⁹

things he might have the preeminence.” By Jesus, the Father does “reconcile *all things* unto himself.”

Whew! What a hymn! After singing it, I am ready to charge out and try my very best to share this incomparable Being with anyone who will listen—even though I know that I will not do him justice as all I might say of Him will come short of his greatness and grandeur. So, in the end, I join in the heaven shout.

“Hosanna, hosanna, blessed be the name of the Lord God!”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Colossians 2.¹⁻⁵

¹For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; ²that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; ³in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. ⁵For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ.

meditation

The word, “mystery,” is no stranger to Paul writings. Sometimes he simply uses the word, as we often do, in reference to something that is obscure and difficult to understand or fathom (See, for example, 1 Cor. 15.⁵¹). More often, the word is associated with God and the things of God. Paul speaks of the “mystery of God,” as he does in this passage, of the “*mysterios* of God” (1 Cor 4.¹), of the “mystery of godliness” (Col. 3.¹⁶), and of the “mystery of Christ” (Col. 4.³). He also speaks of the “mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6.¹⁹), “the mystery of the faith” (1 Tim. 3.⁹), and even the “mystery of iniquity” (2 Thess. 2.⁷).

The “mystery” that most captures Paul’s imagination is that which emanates from God. This “mystery” “in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men” (Eph. 3.⁵), but had been “hid from ages and from generations” (Col. 1.²⁶), even “kept secret since the world began” (Rom. 16.²⁵). But to Paul and his fellow apostles “it is now revealed... by the spirit” (Eph. 3.⁵) and “by revelation” (Eph. 3.3), and “is made manifest to his saints” (Col. 1.²⁶).

So, what was this mystery, unknown until Paul’s day? Often, Paul has this part of the mystery in mind:

“That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs [in addition to Jews], and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (Eph. 3.⁶).

Before Christ, no nation—not the Egyptians, not the Babylonians, not the Persians, not the Greeks, and no, not even Israel— had so conceived of God as to think Him willing or capable of reaching out beyond themselves and their nation. They were all too contracted and too provincial and too biased in their views. Such a God was too expansive and too inclusive for even their wildest imagination. Maybe, here and there, some imaginative individual might catch a glimpse of possibility (Isaiah, for example), but these remained lone wolves, unable to spread their vision among their own people or extend their vision of God beyond their borders to other peoples.

And so, an even greater mystery unfolded.

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Tim. 3.¹⁶).

What kind of God does this? What kind of godliness is this?

Rather than doing as He had done before—speaking and acting in the 3rd person, through prophets, sages, etc.—He, God, spoke and acted in the 1st person. He came to earth Himself, lived openly among humans, and revealed Himself directly and personally.

Oh, what a mystery, what a marvel it is! It is nearly impossible to grasp... “that he would,” for any reason, “descend from His throne divine” (LDS Hymn, “I Sand All Amazed”). But He did. And it is just such unimaginable expansiveness and willing involvement, participation, and unity with the human race that gives us a steadfast hope that He will involve Himself in our individual lives and translate us into an inclusive society that is as expansive as the cosmos.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Colossians 2.¹³⁻¹⁹

¹³And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; ¹⁴blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; ¹⁵and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. ¹⁶Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: ¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. ¹⁸Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹and not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.

meditation

Paul is not very complimentary about the Law of Moses, a law under which he served for at least two or three decades. That law was, he says in this reading, “against us” and “contrary to us.” Though less militantly, Peter seems to agree with Paul, expressing his view that the Law was “a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15.¹⁰). I always wonder if these two men felt this way before they encountered Jesus. I’ve often wondered if their liberating encounter with Jesus caused them to have such feelings or if it simply provided them the courage to speak it out loud. Either way, I, myself, have felt exactly as Peter and Paul in regard to my own inherited LDS religious law code. One can simply never satisfy it. It demands perfection.

All law codes do, of course. Take our common civic law codes. Suppose, for example, I am pulled over on the highway for driving 60 mph in a posted 30 mph stretch of road. I might try to explain to the officer that I was, in fact, a law-abiding citizen. I might do this by avowing that I had robbed no banks, had committed no arson or grand larceny, and had not murdered anyone. The officer will, nonetheless, cite me for breaking the speeding laws. By doing so, he will identify me as a lawbreaker, not withstanding my record of 99% compliance.

This was the very point that Paul made in Galatians when he reminded his readers that the Law cursed, or pronounced, “guilty,” those who did not do everything the law demanded all of the time and that one could remain alive only through such 100% compliance (See Gal. 3.¹⁰⁻¹²).

But the kingdom of God doesn’t actually operate on such exacting standards. Jesus came, in part, to reveal this message of hope. Jesus came to reveal a God who is much more nuanced than the Law of Moses was granted to be. He revealed a God in whom understanding and compassion and mercy dwell in abundance. He revealed a God who is forgiving.

Jesus also came to reveal the true nature of divine expectations. God’s expectations are not to be turned into a kind of narcissistic acrobatic contest of ego perfection. Compliance to God’s will is to be found in our attempts to be moved out of the same desires as Him whose “work and glory” was to advance the welfare and growth of others. Noncompliance to God involves behavior that harms others and stymies their advancement, not those that prick our too-oft too-sensitive, egotistical, and narcissistic conscience—things what we eat or drink, or what we do or don’t do on a holy day or a new moon or a sabbath day, or a host of other shadowy forms of godliness. These things, as Paul says *are* mere shadows. They have little substance to them. As often as not they become false standards for self-righteousness.

We have Jesus to thank for taking them “out of the way, nailing... to his cross. Yet one more reason, of the many, to stand in awe at the foot of the cross and “view his death” (See Jac. 1.⁸).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Colossians 3.¹⁻⁴

¹... Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ... (NIV)

meditation

As we have discussed in previous meditations, Lent is a time of renunciation. More than the slightly inconvenient and short-term renunciation through self-denial, the deeper meaning of renunciation looks for long-term, even permanent and often painful self-denial. During lent we mortify the flesh, examine our priorities, and, where necessary, realign our priorities with those of Jesus and with the purposes of God. During Lent, we seek the transformation of our being into new creatures, born of God not of man. Paul's admonition that we stay aloof from "earthly things" but set our hearts and minds upon "things above" is about more than personal improvement regimens that strive for a kind of enlightened Stoic self-mastery. Immediately preceding today's reading, Paul warned concerning that which was "indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship."

"Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not, which all are to perish with the using), after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh" (Col. 2.²⁰⁻²³).

So, if Paul isn't simply looking for us to discipline and remake ourselves, what is he looking for? It is important to note, consider, and ponder upon Paul's reasons for our rejection of "earthly things" in favor of "things above." We set our affections on "things above" not because we have disciplined ourselves but "*since* [or *because* we] have been raised with Christ." On the other hand, we are to remain aloof from "worldly things" "*for* [or *because* we] died, and [our] life is now hidden with Christ in God." As far as Paul is concerned, it is not enough for one to engage in daily strategies and programs of self-mastery. Why?

First, being of human invention and utilizing human will power self-improvement plans can only create a better human. Second, being of human invention and utilizing human will power self-improvement plans are rarely lasting. Paul's vision sees something more than a thoroughly disciplined human self-made in the image of the very best of human beings. In his vision, he sees God. At work. Personally. Creating. Creating beings that are more than human. Beings made in His image, as he originally intended. So, Lent is a good time to ask ourselves these three famous question:

"And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Al. 5.¹⁴).

This, actually, is what Paul is talking about in today's passage. Go ahead. It's Lent. "Mortify" your flesh. Paul is O.K. with that. Smear ash on your forehead. Dress in sackcloth and ashes. Fast. Deny yourself of pleasures—good and bad. But know this, it is all preamble. A trifle of preparation. The real work of transformation and creation and rebirth will be done by God through Christ Jesus. So during Lent, let's not forget to pray. Let's pray to be born again, permanently transformed, created in the image of God. This rebirth is the gate, not only to being a better person; not only to becoming born of God and being created in his image, but to the very Celestial glory of God for which we all yearn.

“Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (Mos. 27.²⁵⁻²⁶).

Yes, the Lent Season looks particularly to our being born again, “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God’ (Jn. 1.¹³). This is how we thoroughly, permanently, eternally come to have our hearts and minds set on “things above” rather than on “earthly things.” Lent is not the time to settle for something less, something more man-made, something less divine. Let’s let the principles found in Lent take us all the way so that God’s imagery truly is found in our very countenance.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 5, 2024)

Hebrews 13.¹⁻²

Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Meditation

The Hebrew Bible is packed with warnings about how a people who claim fidelity to God are to treat “strangers.” “Strangers” are not to be “vexed” or “oppressed.”¹ No “violence” is to be practiced against them.² “Thou shalt love them as thyself,” God’s people are directed concerning “strangers.”³ God, Himself, not only loves and cares for Israel’s vulnerable, but “loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.”⁴ Of course, God, Himself, rarely conducts such distribution of food directly and personally, but does so through those who, as true followers, heed and obey His requirement of food and clothing distribution to the vulnerable “stranger.”⁵

Just treatment of the “stranger” extends beyond the economic sphere. There are to be treated justly in the legal system as well.⁶ “Strangers” are to be welcome participants in the community that is formed through covenant.⁷ Indeed, “strangers that sojourn among you, which shall beget children among you: and they shall be unto you as born in the country among the children of Israel; they shall have inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel.”⁸ Just as a “curse” is pronounced upon individuals who commit incest, or murder for hire, or steal other’s property, or make and worship idols, so too is a curse pronounced upon those who “perverteth justice toward the stranger.”⁹ Though it is not recognized, the poor treatment of and violence toward strangers was one of the reasons—indeed, the final nail in the coffin—for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁰

Now, just to be clear, the “stranger” is a refugee, a migrant, an immigrant, a resident alien, anyone not native to the land. As can be seen in today’s reading, it was incumbent upon Christians to not only follow Jewish tradition in loving and assisting those who were close to them (*philadelphos*), but to love and be generous toward those who were not close to them, in this case, foreigners (*philoxenia*).

The mention of the “entertaining” of “strangers”—providing food and shelter—is almost certainly a reference to Abraham and his acceptance of and care for three strangers in Genesis 18. These three strangers turned out to be messengers (angels?) with a message for Abraham: Together, he and Sarah would have a son of their own. What if Abraham had not received and shown generosity to the strangers? Would he and Sarah still have had a son of their own, or would they have only remained ignorant of their potential future son? I don’t know. But Abraham was blessed with a message from God because of his generosity toward strangers.

The writer of Hebrews suggests that we too might receive messages from God through foreigners. Thus, foreigners become messengers, angels. Certainly, how we treat foreigners is revelatory as to

¹ Exodus 22.²¹; 23.⁹; Jeremiah 7.⁶; Zechariah 7.¹⁰

² Jeremiah 22.³

³ Leviticus 19.³⁴

⁴ Deuteronomy 10.¹⁸

⁵ Deuteronomy 24.¹⁹⁻²²

⁶ Deuteronomy 1.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

⁷ Deuteronomy 29.¹¹

⁸ Ezekiel 47.²²

⁹ See Deuteronomy 27.¹⁵⁻²⁶

¹⁰ See Genesis 19

who we are. Thus, at the very least, strangers serve to reveal to us our true character.

Unfortunately, America's treatment of foreigners yields an ugly revelation as the nation fails the test of character with its declaration of war on foreigners. If we entertained foreigners—loved and provided for them as we would ourselves—who knows what glorious revelations and promises we might receive. But, in our refusal to love and provide for them as we would provide for ourselves, we are revealed as Sodomites, worthy of fire and brimstone.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 John 1.¹⁻⁵

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; ²(For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) ³that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

⁴And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. ⁵This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

meditation

“God is love.”¹ This is good news, indeed. But, we might be forgiven for feeling that this says too little. Someone might love us from a distance, while not being an active lively presence in our lives. Though we may fear that we sound ungrateful or insatiable, when it comes to God’s love, we admit that we want more than a distant love. We wish to have an active and engaged relationship with our God. This, our desire is not, in fact, indicative of ingratitude or insatiability. Thankfully, God feels the same. He does not wish or intend to love from a distance. He does seek a relationship with us and active participation in our lives.

This is precisely, John testifies, one of the truths that is at the heart of his, or the gospel’s message. God is willing to enter into “fellowship” with us. He desires to share with us what he has. He desires to share with us the life he lives. He desires to share in the life we live. He wishes to take part in our lives. He wishes to be present and active in our lives. This “fellowship,” this sharing, this presence goes beyond, it seems, “love.” It is a fellowship of love, a fellowship of love with God.

Now, this is, truly, good news. Gospel. Like the star that led the Magi to the babe, Jesus, this good news brings a guiding light into our lives. This light chases darkness away. How very appropriate it is, then, and how very pleasing to God that during the Christmas season we plead, in hymn,

“Be near me, Lord Jesus;
I ask thee to stay close by me forever,
and love me, I pray” (*Away in a Manger*).

This plea is ours every minute of every day, Christmas Season or not, now and forever.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ 1 John 4.⁸

1john 1.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

meditation

I have long felt that John nearly perfectly encapsulates the terrible human bind in which we all find ourselves. He admonishes, on the one hand, “that ye sin not” (1 Jn. 2.¹). A tall task, indeed. In fact, an impossible one. To quote Jean Calvin, “I call impossible what has never been.” Worse still, John energetically charges, “he that committeth sin is of the devil” (1 Jn. 3.⁸). Now, no one wants to be accused of being “of the devil”! So, the task is clear. If we wish to avoid being “of the devil,” we must avoid sinning. And if by chance we do fall prey to the devil through sin... uhm, uh... I guess we best not admit it. But, the same John who would have us avoid sin, will not allow us to disavow it. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” So, we mustn’t sin lest we be characterized as “of the devil,” but we mustn’t say that we do not sin thus making ourselves “of the devil.” Quite the bind, indeed.

Little wonder that acknowledging sin and error is so difficult. We are damned if we do and damned if we don’t. I don’t know if this particular bind played a role in the Psalmist’s unwillingness to acknowledge sin (it could easily have been the result of personal hubris), but unwilling he was. And he paid a steep price for his belligerence.

“When I kept silence,
my bones waxed old
through my roaring all the day long.
For day and night
thy hand was heavy upon me:
my moisture is turned
into the drought of summer” (Ps. 32.³⁻⁴).

Finally, humbled by the Lord’s heavy hand of chastisement, the Psalmist made his open confession,

“I acknowledged my sin unto thee,
and mine iniquity have I not hid.
I said, ‘I will confess
my transgressions unto the LORD...’”

And he was immediately rewarded,

“Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32.⁵).

There can be, then, no refusal to acknowledge sin. Refusal to acknowledge personal sin is not only evidence of self-deception, it is evidence of having been deceived by untruth. Refusal to acknowledge sin is also a violent attack upon God, Himself, making of Him a liar. For it is His own testimony that He is “faithful.” He is devoted and committed to us. He does indeed “forgive us our sins,” thereby rescuing us from the grasp of “that awful monster the devil, and death, and hell” (2 Ne. 9.¹⁹). His faithfulness is stronger than sin and is responsive to our acknowledgement of sin, however humiliating and incriminating it may be. Indeed, we will find him advocating for us, often against ourselves and our own self-recriminations, for we might just be the most awful monster we ever face.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1john 3.¹⁶⁻¹⁹

¹⁶Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ¹⁷But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? ¹⁸My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. ¹⁹And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

meditation

We are justified—born again, forgiven, receive a remission of sins—solely through faith in Christ and his grace—his generosity or beauty of character and soul. There can be no thought of working our way to forgiveness or birthing ourselves. We are wholly dependent upon the merits of Christ.

However, having been justified without money and without price, we do have a part to play in retaining our remission of sins. While still in need of help—and much of it—we do have a role to play in our sanctification. With help, we exercise our will and exert our energy in striving to imitate Jesus, the first of sanctified men. Like him, we seek to be of maximum benefit to the individuals that surround us and the societies of which we are a part by laying down our lives to raise others up.

With the apostles warning that “whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion,” we are reminded that one important aspect of our lives that heavily influences and determines our sanctification is economic—how we use our personal economic resources and what we do to influence society's use of economic resources to benefit the less advantaged. As we open up our hearts to those who “hath need,” we follow Jesus in “taking upon ourselves others' infirmities, and feel the assurance of God's pleasure and our sanctification. Thus are we better prepared to face whatever challenges face us in the world to come.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

1 John 5.⁹⁻¹³

⁹If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath *witnessed* of his Son. ¹⁰He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the *witness* that God gave of his Son. ¹¹And this is the *witness*, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²He that hath the Son hath life; *and* he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. ¹³These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

Meditation

A “testimony,” or “witness,” or “record”—all translations of Greek, *martyria*, used, along with its verb, 8 times in this reading—are important words in establishing the seriousness and credibility of one’s words and intents and the nature of one’s character. One who bears testimony makes known the importance of what they say and the certainty of their words. If that testimony proves to be false, others know that the testifier is of bad character and not to be trusted.

So, it is significant that John speaks repeatedly of the testimony/witness or record that God speaks. He is of impeccable character. His words can be trusted. So, when God bears testimony that the good life in the here and now and an enduring life in the hereafter is open to all through faith in Christ and striving to live the life that he encourages, we can with certainty believe that testimony. We need not live in doubt or suspense. We can live in an active and expectant hope of an existence that is enduring.

How very encouraging and strengthening to hear God testify in His own name and through His own authority of His eternal intentions to have us with Him always.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation 5.¹⁻⁹

¹And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice,

“Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?”

³And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. ⁴And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. ⁵And one of the elders saith unto me,

“Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.”

⁶And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. ⁷And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. ⁸And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four *and* twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. ⁹And they sung a new song, saying,

“Thou art worthy to take the book,
and to open the seals thereof:
for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God
by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;
¹⁰And hast made us unto our God kings and priests:
and we shall reign on the earth.”

Meditation

The Book of Revelation is a highly political book. We could point to several reasons for this assertion. Here is but one. There are entire New Testament Books in which the word, “throne,” never appears. While the word appears 43 times in the New Testament, 31 of those appearances are found in the Book of Revelation. For those math enthusiasts out there, this means that just under 75% of the time that the word, “throne” appears in the New Testament, it is in the Book of Revelation.

Obviously, thrones are about rule, governance, and the use of power. That’s politics. Clearly, then, rule, governance, and the use of power are central to the New Testament’s final and most enigmatic book. The Book has something to say about governance and the uses of power. Its message about governance and the uses of power is radical and revolutionary. The sort of governance and use of power that God exercises looks nothing, nothing like that which is found among the kingdoms of this world.

In today’s reading, “throne” appears three times. This reading is a portion of the Book’s first scene. Before proceeding, it might be well to review what has gone before. The Book of Revelation began with an introduction (1.¹⁻³). This was followed by two letters to “the seven churches which are in Asia,” the first letter a universal letter to all seven churches (1.⁴⁻²⁰) and the second to each individual church (2.¹⁻³.²²) separately.

With these preliminaries out of the way, the Revelator presents his first scene (4.¹⁻⁵.¹⁴). In these 25 verses, we are ushered into God’s throne room located in heaven. The scene is a veritable bonanza of imaginative and cacophonous imagery. In addition to the throne, mentioned 17 times, there are rainbows, precious jewels, crystals, lightnings, thunderings, lamps, composite beasts, and elders—24 of them, perhaps an illusion to the 24 courses of Levitical priests as described in the Hebrew Bible (See 1 Chron. 24.¹⁻¹⁹). All of this in just the first half of the scene.

In the second half of the scene, the evangelist sees God sitting on His throne. God holds a book in His hand. Not just any angel, but a “strong angel” invites an expansive audience to take the book from God’s hand, open it, and reveal its contents. But “no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon.” In my mind’s eye, I see many step forward and try. I see Adam, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, Nephi, Alma, Mormon, Joseph Smith, Russell Nelson strain to open and reveal the book’s contents. They all fail. None have the power necessary to the task. This includes, I assume, the “strong angel.” Distraught at the universal failure, the Revelator “wept much.” Clearly, the contents of the book were important. Vital.

But, the Revelator is comforted with the announcement, “Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.” This announcement brings us to the matter of politics, governance, and the use of power.

“Look!” the elder says. “Over there! Here comes a lion.” The lion is a near universal symbol of power and majesty. Powerful, taut, muscular legs. Large, vicious paws with sharpened claws. Mouth and jaws like a vice with teeth that tear and maul. King of the jungle, indeed, king of the entire animal kingdom. Who can resist its power? Who escapes its attack?

Humans are impressed by lions. Lions crowd national flags and litter family crests—bears, snakes, and bald eagles also making the cut. Carved and casted lions flank steps and entry ways leading into governmental buildings. “We are a force to be reckoned with,” the lions announce to citizens and foreign visitors alike. In this world, the lion is an all too appropriate symbol for how the kingdoms of this world rule, govern, and exercise power: with force, intimidation, violence, voraciousness.

Apparently, the Revelator and even the elder who announces the approach of the lion were not immune from this worldly propaganda and twisted value the lion represents. So, having been invited to look, the Revelator looks, fully expecting to see a lion, symbol of power.

But when the Revelator turns his eyes in anticipation of seeing a powerful lion bounding across the landscape, there is no lion to be seen. Instead, what the Revelator sees is something almost the opposite of a lion. Almost the opposite of what human beings think of as powerful. He sees “a Lamb as it had been slain”! The presence of a lamb rather than the expected lion deserves several exclamation points. Talk about expectations not being met!

But what lessons are found in the substitution!

Clearly the Revelator is invited to observe and expects to observe a demonstration of power. After all, the Book is to be opened and no one else has been powerful enough to open it. Just as clearly, the lamb is decidedly not a symbol of power. No self-respecting nation or family is going to put a lamb on their flag or crest. Neither stone nor bronze are shaped into lambs to be stationed before, on, or in a government building in demonstration of intimidating dominance.

But, the lamb that the Revelator sees is not even your typical sort of powerless lamb. This lamb, offered as a symbol of power and capability, is a *slain* lamb. It is a lamb defeated and killed. It was, of course, defeated and killed by the powers of this world, which just so happened to be represented at the time by the mighty Roman Empire.

Given the elder’s announcement and our expectations, what are we to make of the unexpected appearance of a slaughtered lamb in place of a lion as a symbol of power? Obviously, the Revelator and all who would later read his revelation are invited to reexamine their views concerning the nature

of power. What does real power look like? Does it look like a lion or a lamb?

Jesus, of course, was killed by powers that thought of themselves as lionlike. Indeed, Jesus is representative of all innocent and vulnerable people victimized by violent human rule. But there is more to the strange substitution—lamb for lion—than this.

The lamb that the Revelator sees has seven horns. Horns are a symbol of power. Seven horns are ultimate power. So, the lamb *is* powerful. The lamb's power is further evidenced by its having "prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof"—a feat that no other being had been able to accomplish. So, notwithstanding our expectations and our prejudice against such a claim, the lamb is a symbol of true power and its nature.

In this radical substitution of lamb for lion, we see the radical and revolutionary political messaging that takes place throughout the Book of Revelation. The lamb's power is found in its death. The lamb's power is found in its willingness to give itself in the service and advancement of others. The lamb's power is found in its willingness to put others above self. This is what real power looks like. Real power is like a lamb, not like a lion. The world's idea of power—lionlike, with the power to kill, violate, subjugate, mutilate, and sacrifice others for one's own or one's nation's good—is not power at all. It is a sign of abject weakness. It is delusion. It is a sign of perdition.

The sort of rule, governance, and use of power that human beings associate with the lion only leave human flesh torn, bones broken, bodies mutilated, and souls crushed. It is madness, as the opening of the Revelator's apocalyptic vision portrays through his famous four horsemen (Rev. 6.¹⁻⁸), and as the scripture that heads our Just Society posts attests.

“...The heart of the sons of men
is full of evil,
and madness is in their heart
while they live...” (Ecc. 9.³).

The sort of rule, governance, and power that Jesus' exercises from the throne room of Deity and that is associated with a lamb is self-sacrificing. It seeks the interest of others above the interests of self. It is redeeming. But the Revelator's insight extends beyond the rule, governance, and power that Jesus exercises. He learns that Jesus

“hast made us unto our God kings and priests:
and we shall reign on the earth.”

In this world, we must be able to discern the madness of the lion's intimidation and violence. We must discern that it is a sign of the world's perverted views of rule, governance, and the use of power. In this life, we must reject and resist the mad rule, governance and use of power as the world practices it. In this life, we must demand better of the powers that be. In our own lives, we must practice self-sacrifice and the putting of others' interests above our own. Only then can we earn the trust of God so that the final words of this reading are realized in a life to come. We must all be lambs, not lions. We must press those who rule, govern, and use power to be lambs rather than lions. Only in so doing can redemption be found—either for ourselves, for others, and for our society.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation 21.³⁻⁷

³And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying,

“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men,
and he will dwell with them,
and they shall be his people,
and God himself shall be with them,
and be their God.

⁴And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes;
and there shall be no more death,
neither sorrow, nor crying,
neither shall there be any more pain:
for the former things are passed away.”

⁵And he that sat upon the throne said,

“Behold, I make all things new.”

And he said unto me,

“Write: for these words are true and faithful.”

⁶And he said unto me,

“It is done.

I am Alpha and Omega,
the beginning and the end.

I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

⁷He that overcometh shall inherit all things;
and I will be his God,
and he shall be my son.

meditation

Christmas is a season of promise. In it, we celebrate the birth of a babe with a promising future. In it, we celebrate the birth of a babe that offers all who hear of him infinite possibility. Today’s reading is appropriate to the Christmas season of promise. In it, we hear a host of promises. Initially, the promises are announced by an unnamed herald. But immediately we hear the much more faithful voice of God, Himself, commanding that the Revelator record the promises, assuring him and us that they “are true and faithful.” By these witnesses, we are reminded, as we so often are, of God’s faithfulness and the reliability of his promises. “The words of the LORD,” the Psalmist’s testifies, “are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times” (Ps. 12.⁶). For this reason, God can speak and we can act as if every promise “is done.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!