



*When He rose up from prayer, and had come to His disciples, He found them **sleeping from sorrow**. Then He said to them, “Why do you sleep? Rise and pray...”*

Luke 22:45

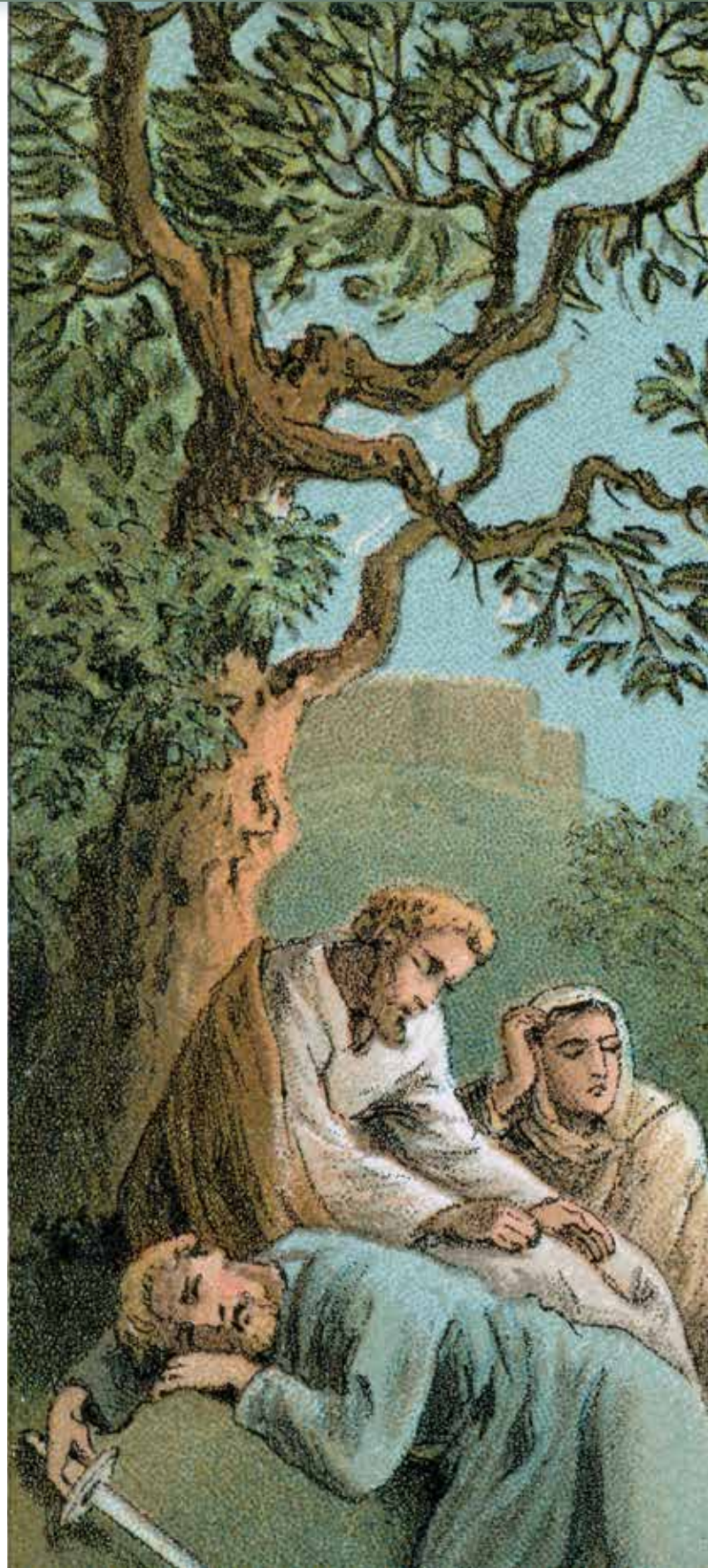
Dear brothers and sisters,

This verse is from the time of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. The Lord took John, Peter, and James with Him and asked them to pray. What did they do? They were so sad that they slept. Sleeping from sorrow may have come from a number of reasons. Surely, they were sorrowful by the announcement of Judas’s betrayal (Matthew 26:22) just hours before. And they were troubled about what Jesus had predicted in the past days. Perhaps, they were uneasy by the ominous atmosphere that suddenly surrounded them, and even confused by the course of events. At one time, Jesus preached and fed thousands, and now, being only a few, they experienced *the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed...*

Alas, all these feelings came to bear on that night in the darkness – sorrow, uneasiness, confusion, overwhelmed by the circumstances. And yet, this was the time when the Lord Jesus needed them the most! *Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour?* How sad the expression – friends asleep, but enemies awake...

Perhaps, we too find ourselves in similar circumstances, even now being alone during the outbreak of the pandemic. We could become overwhelmed in our circumstances, standing helpless and not understanding anything anymore.

Even further, we may become *sorrowful* - when our ideas are not being used, over a conflict with our minister, or during the many issues we have to confront.



There is the danger that one gets tired and has no more courage and doesn't take their faith so seriously. The "sleep" may exhibit itself in the temptation to draw back, withdraw from activity, from taking on more or any responsibility. "If I don't do it today I will do it tomorrow, and if I don't do it then, someone else will do it, and if it is not done, perhaps, it was not that important after all..."

Let's come back to Jesus! This is the time when He wants us to help Him! Not because He could not do anything without us, but because He called us. Can we say that everything has no value and no purpose? It is normal for us to be affected by the difficulties we encounter, but our sorrow must not prevent us from answering the Lord's call. It is precisely now that He is counting on us! He called us today and we want to serve Him.

Here we can understand more clearly the words of Jesus - *The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak* (Mark 14:38). Inwardly, the disciples believed and wanted to follow Jesus and yet, perhaps the part of them that clung to their visions of what could be, power and glory, was not strong enough to follow the lead of the spirit.

We may, at times, have thought, "If only I could have been there with Jesus, listening to His words and seeing His activity." Now it becomes clear that the physical proximity of the three disciples to Jesus, experiencing Him in the purest manner, did not make it any easier to follow Him.

Dear ones, let's remain alert and allow the Spirit within us to be powerful and dominant in our lives. Let's join with Christ in His love for all by serving each other. The victory of Christ is our strength, especially in these extraordinary days!

With loving greetings,





GIVING IS SACRIFICE

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “sacrifice?” Do your thoughts go to the parents who give up their time, energy, and money to give their children a better upbringing than they had? Do you think about the men and women who serve in our armed forces? Are you reminded of the Old Testament and the story of Abraham and Isaac? Or, does the image of Jesus Christ on the cross appear before you? *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this wine, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.*

Whether we recognize it or not, we’ve been introduced to sacrifice in one way or the other. But the real question is, are **you** willing to sacrifice?

WHAT IS SACRIFICE?

Simply stated, to sacrifice is to offer something as a gift to God. But to be more specific to the intention of the Greek word, *thysia*, it means a physical sacrifice of oneself, your person, your entire being, for the glory of God. God’s mercy urges everyone to devote all aspects of life to Him.

For Christians, it’s important for us to note that sacrifice meant something different and served a distinct purpose in the days of the Old Testament and at the time of Jesus’ birth, than it did after His death on the cross. In the Old Testament, the people of God would sacrifice cattle, lambs, goats, doves, or pigeons for the specific purpose of paying for their sins. But that all changed with the incarnation

of Jesus Christ, His death on the cross, and His resurrection. Because Jesus sacrificed His life as an atonement for sin, the need for God’s people to continually sacrifice animals was eradicated. The 10th chapter of Hebrews teaches us this. Consider the following verses: *For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins... By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified* (Hebrews 10:4, 10-14). Jesus’ sacrifice far surpasses all other sacrifices and serves as the source for every acceptable sacrifice today. His sacrifice fulfilled the promises made by God centuries before, and effectively restored the fellowship between the Creator and His people. Sin has been dealt with once and for all. The debt was paid. The power of sin, guilt, and shame was vanquished. The glory of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ will be praised forever.

That is why we should be continually thankful for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and realize that our sacrifices could never compare with His. Jesus’ sacrifice put the love of God on display for all to see. This is repeatedly made known to us in the Gospels and the epistles.

It is in recognition of and response to this great love that we find our willingness to sacrifice.

Jesus' sacrifice allows us the opportunity to surrender our lives to God in thanksgiving and recognition of His love. Our willingness to sacrifice is directly linked to the love we have for God and for people. Without that love, it's impossible for us to offer a sacrifice that will be acceptable to God.

Consider the following from our Catechism: *...a sacrifice in the Christian sense should not be considered an enforced obligation. Neither should it be made in expectation of reward, but rather freely out of faith, out of gratitude, and out of love.* (CNAC 13.2.3) If one sacrifices with such an attitude, it will never feel like a sacrifice, even if it requires great effort. Earnest believers do not think of it as a burden, but rather a joy, to engage their gifts and talents for the benefit of the congregation and their neighbor. If the *willingness to offer and sacrifice* is defined by love, the believer fulfills the will of God and acts in the mind of Jesus.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A WILLINGNESS TO SACRIFICE?

First, it means that you are willing to actually give up your time, effort, and resources to serve God and your neighbor. For sure, giving is costly. But when the love of God energizes the willingness within us to sacrifice, then we will no longer hold firm to our own priorities and desires; they are what we sacrifice in order to serve others and glorify God. Are we willing to give up what we hold most valuable to help grow the kingdom of God?

Second, our willingness to sacrifice means that we are *truly committed* to serving and giving. The love of God impacts our entire lives. Should our commitment to Him be only part-time?

Third, in the Spirit of Christ, we should be willing to give and sacrifice without looking for any response or expecting to receive anything in return. We know that our heavenly Father witnesses all that we do and that He has blessed us and will continue to do so. We know this from Psalm 33:14-15: *The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men. From the place of His dwelling He looks on all the inhabitants of the earth; He fashions their hearts individually; He considers all their works.*

And finally, being willing to sacrifice means that we do not compare ourselves with anyone else and what they are perhaps willing or not willing to give up. We realize that we are all unique and have our own individual relationship with the Lord. We have been created and equipped to be an active participant in the body of Christ. Let's be willing to give of ourselves.

Our desire and willingness to sacrifice is rooted in God's love and mercy. It is because of His love and mercy that our lives are transformed and we can be made spiritually new. We respond to this mercy by sacrificing for His glory. Paul describes the response of this new life that flows out of God's mercy in Romans 12:1:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Because God has been merciful towards us, we in turn offer to Him our bodies as a living sacrifice. Our behavior is our opportunity to make visible the beauty of Christ. Let's allow our living to be an act of worship. Be ever mindful of your actions and your purpose and strive each day for every part of your body - your hands (what you do), feet (where you go), eyes (what you see), lips (what you say) – to display holiness (Hebrews 13:15-16). Even if this means giving up material things that we want or think we need. Continually allow the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit to transform you. Our body becomes a holy sacrifice of worship when it is devoted to God's purposes of righteousness and mercy. Our sacrifice is holy and acceptable to God when it's offered with a willing heart, filled with His love.

Are we willing to sacrifice and give of ourselves to glorify God and make known the name of Jesus? Allow the mercy and love of the Lord to saturate your heart, and you'll be amazed how willing you are to show your love for God and others.

– MJB / LRK

CONNECTED *but apart*

We would like to introduce a sister that has a very relevant experience that she's been kind enough to share with us: **Linda Blessing** is a Linked Member who lives in Timberon, New Mexico. She created a virtual small group with members from across the country, and has agreed to share her experience and give us some tips for taking our small groups virtual during this unique time in our country.

As a Linked Member, I didn't have the option of attending a face-to-face small group, so in January 2016 I created a Facebook page and put out a call to anyone who might like to join me in a virtual gathering. By God's grace, someone responded and we have been meeting ever since.

We were two for a few months, but slowly the word began to get out and we have slowly grown over the years to ten regular participants - most of whom have a local congregation but are unable to attend a small group there. We ten cover every time zone in the country with participants in New York, Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico, and California. Periodically, others who are temporarily away from home have joined us too.

One might wonder how such a gathering can be personal and intimate. We have found a very close tie with one another. It could be the same in a face-to-face gathering, but I believe what has drawn us close is the sharing of experiences, frailties, failings, and concerns. We pray for one another and encourage each other. We have truly grown to love each other and we typically end each session saying just that. Last year I traveled across the country and visited almost everyone in our small group.

The platform that we use is GoToMeeting. We only use the audio option because some of us have slow internet connections - although internet is not a requirement. Most of our group calls in. You need a designated facilitator to set up the meetings each week, to send reminders, and to send the study materials via email to those who cannot get them themselves (not mandatory but it helps with participation). It helps if attendees mute their phone when not speaking to keep background noise at a minimum. We have found that the sound quality in playing the recorded script is poor so we take turns reading the script. That practice also allows discussion as thoughts are prompted during the reading. The facilitator can assist if two or more begin speaking at the same time by asking one to speak and then calling out the others one at a time. Some may think that is a big problem in this type of meeting, but it doesn't happen often and everyone is very respectful when it does. Keeping the group to a dozen or less has likely been helpful to prevent that issue.

Small group discussions have added such a depth to my spiritual growth. I have heard from others in our group that they feel the same. Hearing others' experiences strengthens my faith. The discussions support and reinforce the word from the divine service. During this time of physical isolation, we crave our gatherings even more. - LB



RETIREMENT OF APOSTLE BUEHNER

DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

Dear brothers and sisters,

With the visit of our Chief Apostle to San Francisco, CA in September of this year, our Apostle Earl Buehner will be placed into retirement. The area, that has been under his care since May 2012, and expanded in 2015 with the retirement of Apostle W. Hoffmann, is vast and requires travel across great distances in western United States.

So it is with enthusiasm that I announce to you that, upon his retirement, two districts will be formed from Apostle Buehner's area, and we will have **two** new apostles to care for the members there.



In the Northwest, covering
Montana, Hawaii, and
BISHOP MARK
ordained as



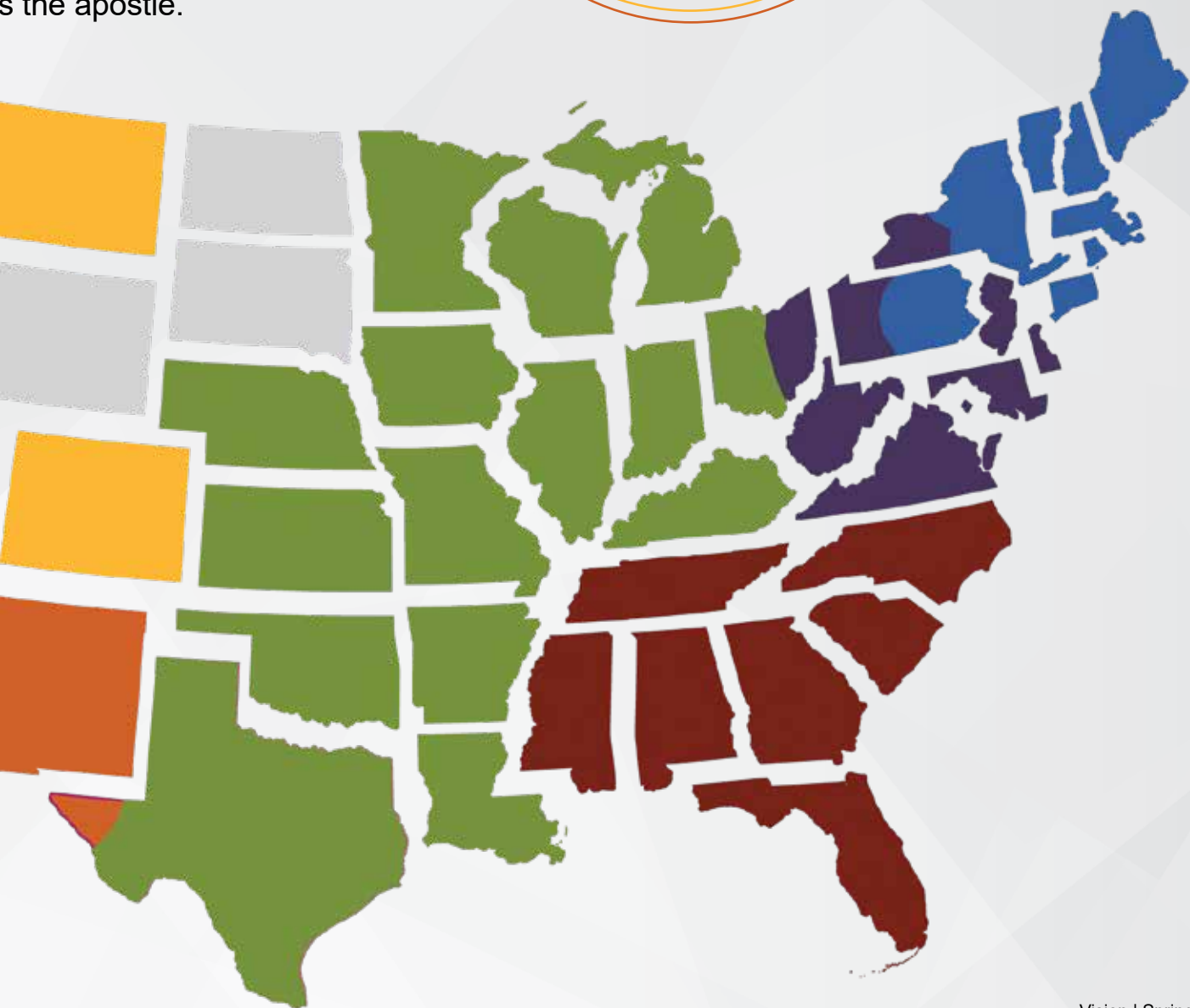
And in the Southwest, the area comprised of the Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Phoenix districts will be cared for by **DISTRICT EVANGELIST LONNIE KLEIN**, who will also receive the apostle ministry.



consisting of the Denver,
and Northwest districts,
FUERBACH will be
the apostle.



Please join me in thanking our God for the blessings,
insight, and friendship that He has shared with us
through the care of our Apostle Buehner over the
47 years in ministry. And also let us
welcome and open our hearts to
our new apostles, along with
their families, as they take on
their new responsibilities in
September. - LRK





LOOKING PAST SUNDAY

This article was written before the suspension of divine services, and is not intended to be insentive, but rather to highlight the value of being together, and inspire anticipation of when we can gather in church again.

Distractions are a part of our reality. No matter how hard we try to focus on the task at hand, there are an increasing number of distractions seeking to shift our focus. Maybe it's the "ding" from our cell phone signifying an email, text message, or social media notification (combine this with the incessant desire to check our phones every 3-5 minutes and you have the perfect focus-destroying combination). Perhaps the interruption comes from a co-worker (statistics show that the typical manager is interrupted every eight minutes, and employees generally spend 28 percent of their time dealing with interruptions and trying to get back on track). Or maybe, just maybe, it's our own mind that's wandering here and there, thinking about the million things hanging out on our to-do list or the multitude of concerns weighing heavy on our heart. To be focused and present takes incredible determination, commitment, and intentionality.

Unfortunately, the first six days of the week don't have a monopoly on distractions, either. Distractions are just as prevalent on Sundays as they are any other day of the week.

Have you ever caught yourself looking past Sunday morning, for instance? Have the events of Sunday afternoon or evening, or perhaps the events of the week ahead, ever eclipsed the wonder of gathering with God's people? All too easily the temptation arises, at times, to take the divine service experience each Sunday for granted and to start looking forward instead to what lies in front of us. We adopt a "what's next?" mentality. We're in worship, but we're not worshipping. We're thinking about what comes next. We're singing a hymn, but we're not connected to the lyrics or to the reason for and recipient of our rejoicing. We're thinking about what comes next. The danger here is that our time spent at church slowly becomes an interruption in our week instead of the culmination of it (and the foundation for the week ahead).

The temptation to look past the glorious gathering of God's people is not unique to us or to this present time, however. Look at what the prophet Amos once had to say to the Israelites:

HEAR THIS, YOU WHO TRAMPLE ON THE NEEDY AND BRING THE POOR OF THE LAND TO AN END, SAYING, "WHEN WILL THE NEW MOON BE OVER, THAT WE MAY SELL GRAIN? AND THE SABBATH, THAT WE MAY OFFER WHEAT FOR SALE?"

AMOS 8:4-5

The new moon refers to monthly worship that took place in Israel (Numbers 28:11-15). Amos caught God's people looking past worship. They wished worship would end and the Sabbath be over so that they could get to what they really wanted to do. They were distracted by what was coming next. Notice that they didn't *skip* the gathering—they just wanted to get on with it. They wanted to get back to their selling and to the making of money. Really, money was their God, and their time spent with others on the Sabbath was simply a speedbump along their path.

Over time, they had come to take lightly the command that God had given to Moses: *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God (Exodus 20:8-10). Sunday, our Sabbath, is to be dedicated to the Lord.* God's people are commanded to cease from their daily labors and pause to worship Him. How beautiful and edifying it is when we can begin our Sunday together in God's house, and what an impact this can have on the rest of the day! The strength we receive through worship, God's word, and Holy Communion gives us all that we need to abide in Him, and to push back against anything that seeks to separate us from Him. As the Apostle Paul once reminded the congregation in Rome, *we are more than conquerors through Christ!* (Romans 8:37). May this be our feeling and heartfelt expression when we come out of the divine service, having received from the Lord all that was so freely given.

When we fulfill a command, however, the concern is that the thing we are commanded to do can start to feel like an obligation. If we're not careful, because we're commanded to gather together and worship God, we can start to see this as an obligation rather than the unprecedented and immeasurable privilege that it is. If our gathering together in the divine service is an obligation, it's the sweetest one ever known to man. How thankful we should be that God lovingly commands us to cease from our work long enough to enjoy Him in worship, in the sermon, and in Holy Communion. What a holy privilege it is to *be still, and know that He is God* (Psalm 46:10).



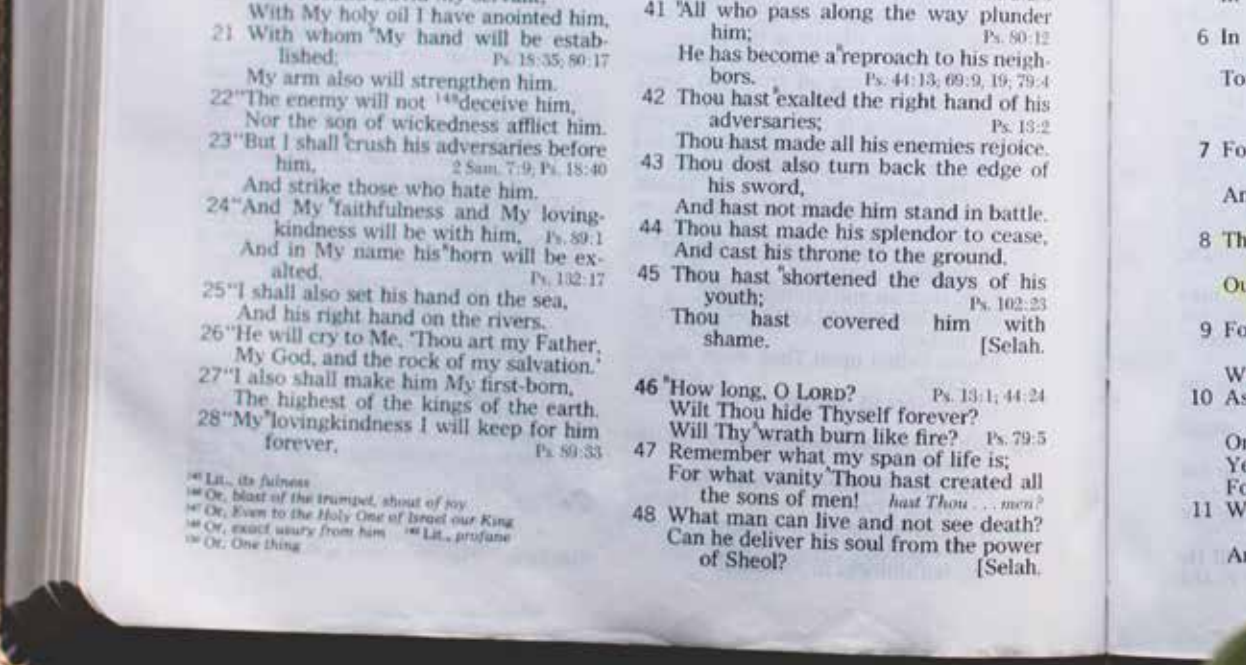
A prominent preacher and author once beautifully summed up the New Testament gathering of God's people in worship:

There was no gathering like this in the world: a people of God's own possession, chosen before the foundation of the world, destined to be like the Son of God, bought with divine blood, acquitted and accepted before the court of heaven, a new creation on the earth, indwelt by the Creator of the universe, sanctified by the body and blood of Jesus, called to eternal glory, destined to rule with Christ. Never had there been a gathering like this before. It was incomparable on earth.

This is the gathering that we're invited into every Sunday, brothers and sisters. Do we still see the value in it? Every week, we have the privilege of coming together to worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness. Every week, we have an opportunity to have direct, intimate communion with Christ in Holy Communion. Every week, we can experience a true foretaste of the Kingdom together through word, sacrament and fellowship. Our weekly gatherings represent a special—and necessary—kind of Christian community. The gathered church has a unique responsibility to proclaim and receive the word of God, to dispense and partake in the sacraments, to lift up their voices in congregational singing, to pray with and for one another, and to engage their spiritual gifts in such a way that the body of Christ is edified. While on this earth, is there anything we should long for more than what we experience together each Sunday?

Instead of allowing ourselves to become distracted by what comes next, let's be focused and present when we assemble to worship the One who already *knows* what comes next, and may our desire to rush in to the gathering of God's people always be greater than our desire to rush out of it.

Rather than look past Sunday morning, let's wish it never ended. – MNJ



Forgiveness

As we live through this unique time where we are unable to come together for divine services, perhaps we have pondered how our sins can be forgiven. What happens when we cannot hear the absolution? Below, you will find the main body of the script from one of our April small group sessions that speaks to this challenge. We hope it will bring you comfort, and also a longing to come to Christ's table once more.

Repentance starts with **awareness**. We must be aware of and reflect on our sinful actions and thoughts, but a deeper recognition must take place: that we are perpetually sinful beings. Realizing how far we actually are from God allows us to take steps to move closer to Him. We are often running in the wrong direction and need to turn back. Awareness leads to **remorse**. Our broken relationship with God brings us grief and sadness, especially when compared to the goodness and love that He offers.

As we experience this inner turmoil and pain, we **confess** our sins to God. Apostle John reminds us that *if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9). This is a prayer that we can practice daily, continually exposing our souls to God in confession and finally asking

for His forgiveness and His strength to help us in our **resolve** to change. Having received forgiveness ourselves prompts us to go down the path of forgiveness and **reconciliation** with our brother, sister, or neighbor, as we pray together in the Lord's Prayer – *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*. Cultivating a repentant heart towards God and seeking His forgiveness are not things that only happen on Sunday; rather, we should wrestle daily, in thought, in prayer, and in reconciling conversations with those we love.

Recognizing that God forgives our sins when we approach Him in repentance, remorse, and confession – let's explore the purpose and importance of the absolution that we hear every Sunday. In the divine service, before the sacrament of Holy Communion, we hear these words, known as the absolution:



I proclaim unto you the glad tidings: in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, your sins are forgiven. The peace of the Risen One abide with you. Amen.

These words are the *assurance* of God's forgiveness – they remind us of His willingness to give us a fresh start by the merit of Christ's sacrifice, and the promise that the Lord loves us and accepts us, no matter how many times we fail. Jesus is the One who forgives our sins, not the minister. But the opportunity to hear those words spoken to us is something that we cannot take for granted. These are comforting words to a repentant sinner.

Let me use two familiar characters to illustrate: Peter and Judas. As we are fresh from experiencing Good Friday and Easter, let us again delve into their stories. Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of the soldiers, which led to His arrest and crucifixion. While Jesus was being tried and beaten, Peter denied knowing Him three times.

Peter denied Jesus, yet experienced the joy and life of Easter. Judas betrayed Jesus, but chose death in a field, alone (Matthew 27:3-10). Both were remorseful: we read in the gospels that after his denial, Peter wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75 / Luke 22:54-62), and Judas was filled with remorse. However, Judas did not get to see the wounds of the resurrected Jesus, or hear Him say, "Peace be

unto you" in the presence of the disciples, or eat breakfast with Him on the shore, or experience the joy and wonder of Pentecost. He is known as the villain of the story, while Peter became the rock on which the church was built. What is the difference between Judas and Peter? Peter repented and turned back to the circle of the disciples. Judas regretted his actions and fled.

In isolation, Judas could not experience the grace of God. Ashamed, he withdrew from the community in which he could hear and experience words of forgiveness. He could not create for himself God's word of grace, and neither can we. We need to hear it said over us, like a balm on our brokenness. As Paul says, faith comes through hearing (Romans 10:17), and in order for us to believe that we are forgiven, we need someone to say it to us. And this is what Jesus gave His apostles the authority to do – to proclaim forgiveness, to preach forgiveness in His name.

It's through **hearing** that we are assured of forgiveness, love, and the peace of Christ. By accepting and believing those words, we can prepare ourselves to have communion with Jesus Christ, our Savior. - KAH



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THANK YOU!

A couple of years ago the Apostles, together with the Sunday School group, decided to restructure the annual monetary children's birthday gifts program of our church (referenced in VISION Spring 2018).

While each child still receives a small token gift for their birthday, another part of each gift is now pooled and contributed each year as a donation on behalf of all children of NAC USA to selected charitable organizations with a focus on children.

For the past years, this donation was made to the St. Jude Children's Hospital network, which provides medical care and assistance to children all around the United States. As a repeat donor, they have been extremely grateful for the substantial support that has been provided by our children, some of whom even took the gift they got for their birthday and added it to the donation!