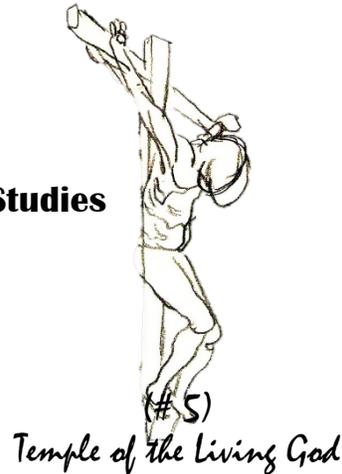


Lourdes Bible Studies

2nd Corinthians



An Acceptable time

Read 2 Cor. 6:1-10

The Old Testament was much more than a text that St. Paul had studied and knew well; rather it was his very lifeblood. We frequently use movies and television references in every day speech as part of our cultural language, Paul's source of reference is the story of Israel recorded in scripture. To understand reality and communicate to others, Paul continually returns to the Old Testament to shed light on the mystery of what God was doing in his life and time.

Here at the beginning of chapter 6, Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8; the Apostle knew scripture the way most of us know movie quotes, and he could have cited any number of passages – so why this one? To understand, we have to know the context in which the quotation lies.

Read Isaiah 49:1-21

Why do you think St. Paul chose this quote? How does it square with what is happening in 2nd Corinthians?

Paul's quotation of Isaiah 49:8 comes within the context of what is called the 2nd servant song, which finds profound fulfillment within Paul's ministry of the new covenant. Notice that directly following what Paul's quotes in verse 8, Isaiah says this: "I have kept you and give you as a covenant to the people...". The servant does not simply preach the covenant, rather, he is a living embodiment of the covenant.

Let's move back to Isaiah 49:6: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Paul calls himself a “servant” of Jesus Christ in the beginning of Romans, Phillipians, and Titus, although the greek work *doulos* literally means slave. Paul has been captured by Christ (as we saw in chapter 2) and is now his servant, who embodies the covenant and is called to bring the covenant to the nations.

Paul’s ministry has an urgency because “now is the acceptable time” – this is the age in which God has called all the earth to obedience through the death and resurrection of Christ. Isaiah had foreseen that in the age to come, God would bring the nations into the covenant. God had chosen Israel, and the mysterious servant, *so that* the covenant might reach gentiles, like those in Corinth: “this is ‘election theology’: the divine choice of Israel, in order that *through* Israel the covenant God may work his saving purposes for the whole world. Paul’s whole point is that this covenant faithfulness of the one God, having been *enacted* in the death of the messiah, is now being *embodied* in his own representative, ambassadorial, apostolic ministry.”¹

Origen had once commented that “even to the end of the world, the day of reconciliation is now”. In some ways this is Paul’s point – with the shocking and powerful death and resurrection of the messiah, a new age has begun, one in which reconciliation with God is not only possible, but urgent.

Paul’s long list of sufferings and virtues (6:4-10) further commend him to the Corinthians as an authentic minister of the Gospel. As Michael Gorman says: “Paul...claims in these (nearly thirty) phrases that he and his colleagues in ministry have met the ultimate test of integrity – conformity to Christ. Whether in affliction, or love, or “making many rich” (c.f. 8:9), Paul and his team have become, in Christ, the righteousness of God (5:21) by “carrying in the body the death of Jesus” and thereby also making visible “the life of Jesus” in their bodies (4:10).”²

How do you make sense of Paul’s paradoxes – “sorrowful yet rejoicing, poor yet making many rich” etc.? How does this apply to our lives as Christians?

unevenly yoked...

Read 2 Cor. 6:14-18

After having urgently pleaded for reconciliation with God, Paul can now call the Christians of Corinth to an exodus. He begins with a command “do not be mismatched with unbelievers”. Traditionally this passage has been interpreted as a call for Christians to only marry other believers; the problem with that interpretation is that there is no context about marriage coming into this section, or leading out of it.

Some scholars however think this passage continues Paul’s polemic against the “false apostles” who have preached a different Gospel (11:4) and turned the community against Paul.

¹ N.T. Wright *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2013. Pg. 883

² Michael Gorman *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI 2004 Pg. 308

However we come to understand this passage, Paul is certainly calling for a separation on the part of the community, which rubs against much of the sentiment of modernity. In our own time, we tend to have a distaste for any form of exclusivity or separation. Paul however is clear, and all this following directly after a call to “widen your hearts”.

Talk about separation – whether it means Christians refusing to marry non-Christians or a more general separation of Christians from those who are “unbelievers” – what should our attitude be towards non-Christians in our time?

Most of us object to the idea that we should create some sort of Catholic “ghetto”; after all, shouldn’t Christians be leaven in society, or “the light of the world” (Mt. 5:14)? The answer is of course that they should, but Paul also knows that the world easily corrupts us, and if we spend our lives with people who do not love and obey Christ, odds are that we will soon be like them.

The church can only truly be holy if it is different from things that are common. Today, there are more and more churches who are tearing down traditional Christian teachings of moral nature. These churches argue that Christian teaching on sexuality, abortion, etc. creates barriers for people to enter, and is thus an obstacle to community.

Paul however had no problem with moral teaching, to enter the family of God one has to break ties with the world. It is hard to be a Christian, it is counter-cultural to be obedient to Jesus. For the church to serve society, it has to be distinct from society and the popular culture. A church which simply buys into the spirit of its time is seen to lack the voice of truth, it is like the politician who speaks whatever will gain him more votes, and never stands for anything. God says to Israel: “You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”³

The ban on marrying non-believers is one of the strongest warnings of the Old Testament. God forbids the Israelites from marrying outside Israel, because inevitably it will lead to idolatry. God gives this command to Israel before she enters the promise land: “you shall not make marriages with them [the 7 nations of Canaan], giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods...”⁴ This is precisely what happened to king Solomon, where his foreign wives turned his heart to idolatry.⁵ In today’s church, while marriage to non-Catholics or non-Christians is permitted, it is one of the greatest sources of Catholics abandoning their faith.

Paul’s image of Christians as the new Temple of God is an important one. The temple was the place where:

- 1) Sins were forgiven
- 2) Sacrifice and worship was offered
- 3) God’s presence dwelt

³ Leviticus 20:26

⁴ Deuteronomy 7:3-4

⁵ 1 Kings 11:3-4

It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of the temple for Jews. N.T. Wright puts it this way: “the point of the temple...is that it was where heaven and earth met. It was the place where Israel’s God, YHWH, had long ago promised to put his name, to make his glory present.”⁶ The temple is the center of the universe for a Jew, and here Paul makes what should be a shocking statement: “for we are the temple of the living God”.

Christians, are now the place within which God has made his dwelling place. They are the place where real forgiveness happens, where true sacrifice is offered and the place where heaven and earth intersect.

What does it mean to be a person who is a cross section of Heaven and Earth? Can you think of someone in your life who seemed to join the two together?

Paul closes out chapter 6 with a quote from Isaiah 52:11 – and for us to understand the richer meaning, we need to look at the context of that quote.

Read Isaiah 52:7-12

One important thing to notice about this passage is that it is a 2nd Exodus passage, meaning that God here is prophesying a new and greater Exodus for his people. Central to Israel’s exile from the promised land in the year 587 B.C., was that God’s presence had left the temple behind due to its defilement by the Israelites. Here in Isaiah, the prophet foresees a time when the watchman will see good news (gospel) – and the good news is “the return of the Lord to Zion”. Because of God’s return, Jerusalem breaks into song, and the chosen people purify themselves from all sin and uncleanness.

This text finds profound resonance in 2nd Corinthians – the people of God are now called to cleanse themselves because God has indeed returned to his temple, but in a manner no one would ever have dreamed. Christians themselves are now the temple to which God has come, and thus the proper response is to go through exodus, to leave the world and its sinfulness behind, and to break out into the song of the Gospel – the joy of God’s return to inhabit his new temple.

For Next Time

- *Realize that together, we are the temple of God*
- *Be God to purify you – to be different from the world*
- *Read 2 Corinthians 8-10*

⁶ N.T. Wright *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. 96