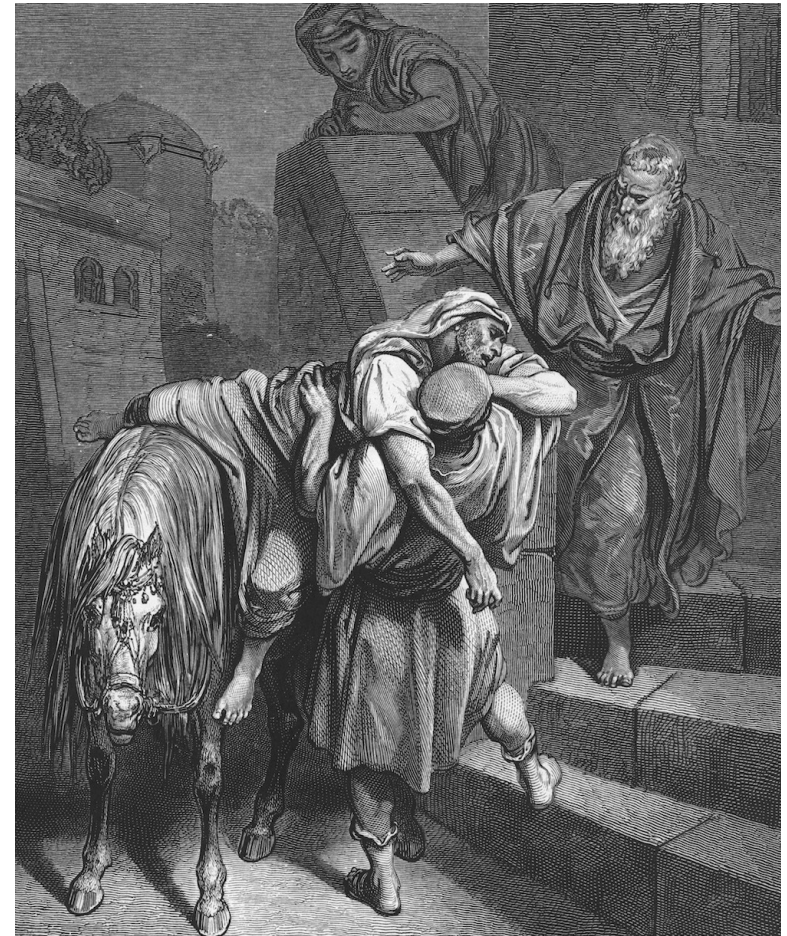


Almost all investment literature warns you that past performance is no guarantee of future results. However, in the case of the Children of Israel past performance WAS a guarantee of future results. They would fail miserably. Moses loved his people and had warned them of what would happen if they turned away from God to idols. He knew how easy it was to sin against God. He was feeling the disappointment of not being allowed into the promised land. He had no one to blame but himself.

Moses knew that the Israelites could be easily swayed from the Truth so he warns them. Tough times would come to bear upon the Israelites if they turned away from God. They would be sent back into bondage. But the most important thing for the Israelites to know was that the Lord would use the tough times to help them realize what they had done. God would use those times to turn their hearts back to Him.

The way God deals with His people has not changed. We often sin and must bear the consequences. We may feel abandoned by God but at those times He is even closer than we think. He is there guiding us through those moments of despair to bring us to the realization of our need for repentance. His Holy Spirit has been given to us to guide us from this life to life eternal. We are thankful that with our God past performance IS a guarantee of future results “for the Lord our God is a merciful God.”

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



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THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Luke 18:9-14 (NKJV)**

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

THE COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, who is always more ready to hear than we to pray and are wont to give more than either we desire or deserve, pour down upon us the abundance of Thy mercy, forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

When one listens to Moses in today’s reading you might ask, “Where’s the good news?” While it is true that the demands of the Law are great, we do best when we don’t lose sight of the First Commandment. Luther’s explanation in the Small Catechism is quite clear: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Sounds pretty demanding, doesn’t it? We naturally hear Law whenever God’s Word is spoken because the Law is written on our hearts. The Gospel is another language, a foreign language to our ears. The Holy Spirit must give new ears to hear and to understand the Gospel. One of the great points of understanding the Gospel is knowing that what God demands in the Law He gives to us in Christ Who fulfills the Law for us.

When Luther tells us to fear, love, and trust in God above all things, he is telling us that most assuredly we can fear, love, and trust in God even above our sins. The righteous Israelite was righteous for the same reason God’s righteous people are righteous, today. “The righteous shall live by faith.” The righteous believe that we can and, indeed, must go to God with our sins for with God, and only with God, is there forgiveness.

What God demands of us in the First Commandment, and in all the Commandments, He has given us faith to believe that it is ours in Christ. There, in Christ, we see what all of Israel was supposed to be, a perfect Son. And there, in Christ, God sees us as perfect, holy, and righteous because He has placed us into His Son through the faith He has given us.

Moses made one mistake along the way on the journey to the Promised Land. Because of that one mistake God said Moses would not enter the promised land. It was just one mistake. Moses had led the people out of Egypt. He received the Ten Commandments from God and returned to see the people had turned from God to idols. He pleaded before God on behalf of the people. He stayed with the Israelites throughout their many years of wandering in the wilderness. Didn't all this count for something?

Moses "pleaded with the Lord... let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan," but to no avail. The Lord had spoken and He was not about to change His mind.

There are times when it seems as though our Lord is harsh. We can often find ourselves pleading with God to change the results of the mistake we make. We make a dumb mistake and find ourselves paying the consequences. Why won't He just change things and make it go away?

We plead to the point where the Lord says, "Enough of that!" We finally come to the realization that "it is what it is." We are also brought back to an even greater realization. God is still with us. Throughout all life's problems God remains our faithful God and brings us back to the realization that when all is said and done, life isn't about getting what we want in this world.

God took Moses to the mountain top to see the land He had promised. Every Sunday, God takes us to the mountain top to show us our promised inheritance: Life eternal with Christ.

Yesterday we heard a comparison between two men concerning humbleness: a publican and a tax collector. Today we hear about one like the publican: Obadiah, the king's servant, "who feared the Lord greatly." The other, like the tax collector: King Ahab, who honored himself. In comparison, one honors God with his life while seeking mercy, the other honors his life while opposing God's mercy. Mercy was sought when Elijah sent Obadiah to announce his arrival before King Ahab, who searched diligently and was unable to find Elijah. Obadiah feared for his life as he was to announce that he succeeded where the King and his men failed.

In these last days, we have nothing to fear when God's Messenger, Jesus Christ, sends us as simple servants with the message that Jesus Christ has been found where others have failed to locate Him. Christ is in the Word of God and Sacraments: Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

This announcement is not popular, as it opposes those who seek after other gods, honoring themselves while opposing God's mercy. Dear friends, fear not. The same mercy that Obadiah sought is found in these words, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 Jn. 5:12).

We pray: Hallelujah! Let praises ring! To God the Father let us bring our songs of adoration. To Him through everlasting days be worship, honor, power, and praise, whose hand sustains creation. Singing, ringing: Holy, holy, God is holy; spread the story of our God, the Lord of Glory. Amen. (TLH 23:1)

In our reading for today we see that the Lord will not be mocked. Hence the purpose for Elijah's visit to King Ahab. Ahab did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him as King of Israel. He took as his wife Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; he served Baal and worshiped him; he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. Ahab also made a wooden image, provoking the Lord God of Israel to anger more than all the kings of Israel who were before him. Our God is a jealous God and will not allow his Honor to be given to another.

Verses 20-40 are among some the most powerful examples of God's might as He demonstrated that He is the one and only true God, that He can even defy the laws of nature as water is consumed with fire. And again the people believed in the one true God.

In the midst of so many different false gods and their beliefs that are pulling for our attention, we need to daily return to the inspired, inerrant Word to be strengthened in our faith and witness. There we are reminded just what the Almighty Triune God is capable of doing to those who mock Him and His identity.

We Pray: Hallelujah! Let praises ring! Unto the Lamb of God we sing, in whom we are elected. He bought His church with His own blood, He cleansed her in that blessed flood, and as His Bride selected. Holy, holy is our union and communion. His befriending gives us joy and peace unending. Amen. (TLH 23:2)

Thirty-eight years has elapsed since the time the Israelites had rebelled against God. The generation that rebelled was gone except for Joshua and Caleb. Now things were different. The Children of Israel listened to God, followed His command, and Heshbon was given to them at the expense of King Sihon.

King Sihon had been given the opportunity for peace. Moses sent emissaries requesting safe passage and promising a great deal of commerce. But the king refused. Therein lies the key to understanding why God "hardened his spirit." God only confirmed in King Sihon who the king already was—

one who truly hated God. God gave the king what he wanted.

Contrast that with another king, a king who came many years later: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." King David was no better than King Sihon. Both were sinners. Yet, God was merciful to David and brought him to repentance.

Why David and not Sihon? God gives us the answer, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." We might think there was something about David that deserved mercy, but then it wouldn't be mercy. Mercy is not earned but simply given. It is enough for us to trust in God Who is beyond our understanding and forgives our sins. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"

God will have His way. Won't He? First He told the Israelites to go and take the land He was going to give them, but they rebelled and wouldn't go. He doles out His punishment: "not one of these men of this evil generation shall see that good land." Upon God's pronouncement, the Israelites have a change of heart. Fearing the punishment, they are now ready to go in. But, it's too late. What God decrees is so and He tells them not to go.

So, what do the Israelites do? They do what they so often do. They don't listen to God's command and they go in any way. And, just He had told them, they were defeated. They just don't seem to get it. The overall plan with God was simple. They were to listen to God's Word as spoken by Moses and follow through with what God had told them. Just listen and then follow through.

There are many church bodies today who think they have found a better way to grow the Church. They appeal to people's "felt needs." They start with what the people think they need rather than listen to what God says people really need. The truth is that all people need is forgiveness of their sins. Whether people "feel" the need for forgiveness or not, sin remains the problem "for all have sinned." God's plan is simple, "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations." The Church need only listen to God's Word and follow through.

Here is a situation where there is a death threat given because a servant is faithful. The unbelieving world does not take kindly to being exposed and threatened with the name of the Triune God. But, rather than try to destroy the One True God, they come after God's servants, as in Jezebel's attempt to kill Elijah.

However, God intervenes and enables Elijah to travel for 40 days and nights to Mount Horeb to prove to him he is not alone. The Lord shows that He has things under control, seeking to protect His servant's life and seeing that His message will continue through Elisha.

It may seem, at times, as a wasted use of serving others with the message of God through the Word and Sacraments alone, but we are not alone either. God has things under control. Our omniscient God knows how much His servants can handle as the unbelieving world defiles the reputations of God's servants with lies and accusations. The faithless make threats when we won't commune someone's Methodist grandma, or members threaten to withhold their tithes and offering until a "new and more loving, understanding pastor replaces you." God will protect and rescue His servants from the battle at just the right time, as He strengthens one's faith to always remember it is God who is hated and despised, the servant is only the scapegoat. Thanks be to God.

We pray: Hallelujah! Let praises ring! Unto the Holy Ghost we sing for our regeneration. The saving faith in us He wrought and us unto the Bridegroom brought, made us His chosen nation. Glory! Glory! Joy eternal, bliss supernal; there is manna and an endless, glad hosanna. Amen. (TLH 23:3)

God is faithful to His Word as Elijah is rescued from the unbelieving world and its threats, and the Lord's message continues through the Prophet Elisha.

There is always someone who doubts the ways of the Lord. Here it is the sons of the prophets of Bethel and Jericho, seeking to downplay Elisha being God's chosen prophet replacing Elijah. Elisha is strengthened in his faith as Elijah keeps his word and passes on a double portion of his spirit to Elisha. Elisha takes Elijah's mantle and begins fulfilling the Lord's will as he is acknowledged by the sons of the prophets as having the spirit of Elijah.

Still, Elisha is not completely trusted as the sons of prophets are determined to seek for the body of Elijah rather than believing he was taken up in a whirlwind and chariot. Elisha discourages them, but they refused; no body is found. This produces one of the first "I told you so" statements in the words: "Did I not say to you, 'Do not go'?"

May we in these last days not doubt what the Lord ordains, the ongoing office of the Holy Ministry, as His messengers are to speak His Word in all its truth and purity and administer the means of grace according to Christ's institution.

We pray: Hallelujah! Let praises ring! Unto our Triune God we sing; blest be His name forever! With angel hosts let us adore and sing His praises more and more for all His grace and favor! Singing, ringing: Holy, holy, God is holy; spread the story of our God, the Lord of Glory! Amen. (TLH 23:4)

"These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel..." begins the Book of Deuteronomy as Moses recounts the history of the Children of Israel during their forty years in the wilderness. By doing so, Moses prepares them to enter the land God had promised to their forefathers.

In today's reading, Moses reminds them of how they had refused to enter the land of the Amorites because they were afraid. They were looking at the situation with the eyes of their flesh rather than with the eyes of faith. They had already seen God in action as He had delivered out of Egypt and had destroyed the armies of Pharaoh. Yet, even though the eyes of their flesh had seen God's mighty acts, those same eyes deceived them into thinking that God had brought them to the wilderness to destroy them.

Moses would have the people look back in remembrance to see what God had already done for them so they could go forward without fear as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Every step of the way, God had been with His people. Though many times they were unfaithful, God remained faithful to the promise He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Yet these words of Moses aren't just for the Children of Israel. They are meant for God's children, today. The whole of Scripture is written to remind us of God's faithfulness to His people throughout time and the fulfillment of His promises. God promised to send a Savior. Jesus came and rescued us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Now all that remains for us, His people, is His promised return.

THE HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 6:24-34 (NKJV)

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

“Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

“So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

THE COLLECT

Lord, we beseech Thee, let Thy continual pity cleanse and defend Thy Church; and because it cannot continue in safety without Thy help, preserve it evermore by Thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In our reading for today we see just how compassionate our Lord is concerning the welfare of those who confess His saving name. In the first case, we see how God overcomes death through water and a clarifying agent of salt, which is a most beautiful picture of how God overcomes death through water and the clarifying agent of His Holy Word, through which the Spirit of God creates faith, life, hope and salvation. In 2 Kings 4:1-7 we see how God works through His servant to provide daily bread and future existence.

As in our text, there are always those who despise whom God uses to show His power and compassion, namely, His chosen servants. In our first text, people mocked Elisha because of his baldness, which caused him to condemn the mockers and two bears mauled his mockers.

Today, people use too many cookie-cutter concepts to determine who should be in the Office of the Holy Ministry or who should not. (Such people should also be wary of bears.) Often servants are not received or accepted based on color, size, disabilities, wives, children, to the mockery of God who calls these men into the Holy Ministry based on their faithfulness to the Word of God. When God’s will is accomplished, people are simply strengthened to rely on the gifts that God gives, like daily bread in this life, just as He provided for the woman and her two sons.

We pray: Lord, open Thou my heart to hear and through Thy Word to me draw near; Let me Thy Word ever pure retain, let me Thy child and heir remain. Amen. (TLH 5:1)

Today we read of the love and compassion a person has for a servant of God who is faithful to his calling. A woman from Shunam provided for Elisha a place to stay and food to eat when he was in the area. When asked what he could do in return, she complained of having no sons. Elisha foretells of a new child to arrive one year later. He is born, but then dies a short time later. The woman returns to Elisha for his life to be restored.

Here we have one of the more beautiful stories of a person who has received the gift of faith. This woman loves freely, and then in the midst of heartache and disappointment does not go off and lose hope, but continues to trust in the power of God through the Lord's chosen prophet and servant to restore life.

Similarly, this is God's will for His children who are given faith through His powerful Word, preached in all its truth and purity. However, that instruction in the faith must continue so each person is strengthened to deal with life's heartaches and disappointments, always being ready to return to hear God's powerful Word of peace and hope.

We pray: To God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, Three in One, shall glory, praise and honor be now and throughout eternity. Amen. (TLH 5:3)

In Malachi's day Israel had become complacent in the fear of the Lord and meditating on His Name. The people, led by wicked and self-indulgent priests, believed that these things were a vain service to the Lord. These things didn't matter to them because they believed there was no benefit in serving the Lord. "It is vain to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of Hosts?" (3:14) The outward action was not satisfying them because they were not doing the Lord's commands out of faith and love toward God. When these things "didn't work" to arouse their feelings of piety and to make their lives easier in the short term, they mocked the worship of the Lord and despised it.

In an age in which God is mocked, there will always be a remnant who continues to fear the Lord and meditate on His Name. This is seen in verse 16. The fear of the Lord is faith which fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things. His Name is God's entire self-revelation in the Holy Scriptures, for wherever God's Name is, there God Himself is to do His saving work through His means of grace. Those who do not abandon the Lord, faith, and the Word, are as jewels to the Lord, part of His precious treasure which is the Holy Christian Church. By faith in Christ, you are a precious jewel to the Lord, for you are His treasure which was bought at a great price: by the blood of Jesus.

Everyone had defiled himself. The priests no longer taught the Law of the Lord as they were charged. They treated their own office with contempt so it is no wonder that the people of Judah treated their office, and the Word of the Lord, with contempt. Husbands were also unfaithful to their wives, dealing treacherously with them and despising marriage. No one, it seemed, took their divinely-instituted vocations seriously. To make matters worse, they wearied God by saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and He delights in them.” (2:17) It is the way of unrepentant sinners to call evil good so that they may call good evil.

In response to all of this the Lord would send His messenger to preach repentance so that the sins of Israel could be scrubbed away and their guilt be purged. We know this messenger as St. John the Baptizer, whom the Lord sent to prepare the way of the Messiah by preaching repentance. We hear from St. John the Baptizer that we need to repent of our sin of not taking our divinely-instituted vocations seriously and solemnly. We hear from him to repent of unfaithfulness in hearing the Word of God and turning from the heavenly Bridegroom.

Hearing the messenger’s message of condemnation and repentance prepares the way for his second word: “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” By faith in this word, the Lord purges our guilt and remits our sins and makes us once again into His people.

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Mark 7:31-37 (NKJV)**

Again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, He came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him. And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

THE COLLECT

Almighty and merciful God, of whose only gift it comes that Thy faithful people do unto Thee true and laudable service, grant, we beseech Thee, that we may so faithfully serve Thee in this life that we fail not finally to attain Thy heavenly promises; through Jesus Thy Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

There is a tourist attraction along the banks of the Jordan River, just south of Tiberias, where the river flows south from the Sea of Galilee. It is purported to be the site of the Baptism of Jesus, but that more likely took place somewhat to the south, near where the modern Allenby Bridge crosses between the West Bank and Jordan. There in Tiberias tourists purchase small flasks of water from the Jordan River, as well as other souvenirs. Some people instead fill empty soft drink bottles directly from the river to carry home for the scheduled baptism of a young family member.

The Syrian warrior Naaman disdained the Jordan, preferring the cleaner water of the rivers flowing through Damascus. Naaman did not have faith in the Lord, but he apparently had a wary trust in the power of Elisha to heal his leprosy. Reluctantly he obeyed the prophet's instructions and was cured. He then declared that "there is no God on earth except in Israel." The grace of God created faith in Naaman's heart.

The grace of God preceded us as we were washed, not in any local watercourse, but in simple tap water comprehended together with God's Word and promise. We were baptized into Christ's death and became heirs of the kingdom of God. And not our ears but our hearts were opened by God, who indeed does all things well. Faith was created by the life-giving water and Word of Holy Baptism, for which we will bless the Lord at all times, His praise being continually in our mouths.

We are always tempted to believe the Lord does not love us. When temptation strikes, when trials weary our minds, and when nothing seems to go in our favor, we easily reason that God must be against us. The people of Malachi's day complained against the Gospel and said, "In what way have you loved us?" This unbelief in God's favor and face shining upon them led them to treat His newly rebuilt temple and His Divine Service with contempt. They offered defiled food on the altar and complained that the worship of the Lord was wearying. Of course it was wearying! If you don't believe the Lord is favorable and gracious to you, worship is a heavy burden because the Lord is only worshiped by faith. The Lord reminds Israel of His favor and faithfulness, for He chose the children of Jacob to be His people.

When our flesh is tempted to believe that God is against us and not for us, it is impossible to truly worship the Lord. Faith in the Gospel is the only response to such temptations and carnal thinking. Faith believes that no matter the outward circumstance, the Lord loves us and is giving us good things according to His fatherly divine goodness and mercy. We are to remember that "God so loved the world" and that love is manifested in His sending of Jesus to die for our sins. If the Father spared not His Only-Begotten Son for us, why on earth would anything else be able to separate us "from the love God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?"

Sin. Repentance. Salvation. Sin. Repentance. Salvation. This was the cycle during the time of the Exodus, the Judges, and the Kingdom. This is the cycle which the people of Jerusalem recount in the second half of their confession of sin to the Lord. It is our cycle as well. Daily we sin. Daily we are called upon to repent of our sins. Daily Christ absolves us our sins and applies His merits to us by faith. The Christian life is one of daily imbibing the Law and then the Gospel. And good thing! For our sin is our chief problem in this life. Selfishness, boredom, laziness, sloth, lust, ambition, avarice, hateful thinking, grudge-holding, mammon-worshiping, all-encompassing sin is our daily problem. And it's not one sin then it's another. The Law of the Lord, love for God and love for neighbor, always bears down upon us and accuses our consciences, showing us just how wicked even the best of us truly are.

But thanks be to God that He is merciful to His wayward children. The Law always accuses but the Gospel always forgives, restores, and rebuilds those who are broken by the Law. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn. 1:8-9). "In the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven; And according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies." (Neh. 9:27).

Elisha was not afraid to warn the king of Israel of the threat of an imminent Syrian invasion. That action quickly translated itself into personal danger for Elisha when the king of Syria deployed horses, chariots, and a great army to surround the city of Dothan specifically to capture or slay him. The Lord opened the eyes of Elisha's young servant, revealing that the mountain bristled with an angelic army poised to repel the enemy forces.

Like Elisha, we should not be afraid to speak God's Word of truth, even in the face of stiff opposition, whether that results in mere unpopularity or more difficult things, like financial repercussion. In the inspired words of the Psalmist, "Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident. ... For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock" (Psalm 27:3, 5).

He has promised, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you" (Psalm 50:15). The angelic army stood at the ready, although not a sword was drawn. Similarly, twelve legions of angels were at the ready, awaiting a word from Jesus on the night of His betrayal. But God had other plans. Sometimes the path before us seems too frightening to bear, but our Good Shepherd remains with us even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Through Word and Sacrament our eyes are opened to look upon Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith.

Jehu brought an end to the house of Ahab and wiped out Baal worship in the land. He eradicated Baal worship, not because He worshiped the one true God, but because the Baal-ist leaders were allied with Ahab and were a threat to Jehu. He did away with them by deception, declaring a festal assembly, then blocking the doors and having them all put to the sword. He had ensured full participation in the assembly by decreeing that all who were absent would be slain. And, as we see, all who showed up were slain anyway. There was an additional death threat: any guard allowing anyone to escape would also be killed.

We too live under a death threat, being the inheritors of the dread sentence brought about by Adam's disobedience. "All flesh is grass, ... The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:6, 8). In that holy Word of God we have the assurance that whoever trusts in Christ shall live, even though he dies. Far from being merely relieved that we have "dodged the bullet," the Gospel makes us into new persons.

Jesus spoke of an exchange: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). We are empowered in this by the truly great exchange in which He who had no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We are not included in the sins confessed by the Jews upon return from the exile. Verse 2 reminds us that this confession is for people descended from Abraham. However, this confession of their sin is a model for us Christians to show us how we are to confess. The Lord's mercy is ever before the penitent. God had graciously created them and chose them in Abraham to be God's people. The Lord brought them out of the land of Egypt into a land ready to be inhabited. Yet in spite of all of these gracious gifts, their fathers acted proudly and refused to obey the Lord, preferring the bondage of sin to the worship of the Lord Who had been so gracious to them. When one considers their sin in proportion to the gracious gifts and salvation of God, the lawlessness and shame of sin becomes all the greater. Their confession is an example for us. The Lord bestows so many great gifts on us in Christ Jesus, as well as the gifts of "clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home- stead, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods." Yet we daily sin and turn to the desires of our hearts.

"But you are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them." The Lord never forsook His people but was always ready to forgive their sins when they penitently confessed them. So it is with us today. The mercy of the Lord is far greater than the depths of our sin and His gracious salvation is stronger than the defilement of our transgressions.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 22: NEHEMIAH 7:1-4; 8:1-18 TRINITY 14

The people gladly hear the Word of the Lord from Ezra. The “ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.” (v.3) So we are to hear God’s Word in the Divine Service and we are to do so attentively, not letting our minds wander or our hearts pull us away from the Word being delivered. We also see how the Lord provided faithful Levites to help the people understand God’s revelation. “They gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.” (v.8) God works the same in the Old Testament as He does in the New. Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes through preaching of the Word of God.

The Lord worked through His Law and Gospel in the Old Testament just as He does in the New. The Law condemns the people for what they have failed to do, namely, love the Lord their God and love their neighbor as themselves. “For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.” (v.9) The Gospel then is given to these contrite sinners, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to shoe for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (v.10) When the Law condemns, the Gospel must be preached lest sinners are lost in despair. The Lord does not want His Christians moping around, despairing and destitute. He commands us to be joyful in Christ, Who has fulfilled the Law in our place and then gives us that merit by faith.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11: 2 CHRONICLES 29:1-24 TRINITY 12

Hezekiah fixed the temple doorway and restored the sacrificial system. Martin Luther damaged, in a sense, the church doorway and reformed the sacrificial system. Hezekiah had the doors repaired and sanctified and cleansed the temple after years of abuse and misuse under the reign of Ahaz. And he had the priests and Levites reinstitute the practice of the burnt offerings and sin offerings. Martin Luther pounded a nail hole into the Wittenberg church door to post his famous Ninety-Five Theses, setting into motion the Reformation. Among the abuses that came to be reformed was the teaching that forgiveness required certain works and satisfactions on the part of the penitent.

No longer are animals sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins. Instead, we trust in the power of the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, to wash away our sins. “Our churches also reject those who do not teach that forgiveness of sins comes through faith, but command us to merit grace through satisfactions of our own” (AC XII:10).

By grace we have been saved, and in that we have our sufficiency. We make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob, therefore, because we have a High Priest who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself (Hebrews 7:26-27).

The reform Hezekiah instituted at the temple soon spread throughout the land. Firstfruits were offered for the provision of the priest and tithes for the Levites. So generous was the people's response that it was literally heaped in the temple. The storage rooms Solomon had built into the wall of the temple had to be prepared to accommodate the offerings. Eventually the offering of agricultural products was replaced with money placed in a box at the temple entrance. The offering trays we use today came much later.

While tithes are no longer required, and while it is also true that God does not necessarily respond by giving us monetary blessings in return, nonetheless our generosity is encouraged. The Lord loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7), one who gives not grudgingly, but out of love, so that the pastor can be enabled to devote his time to the Lord's work, mission work and schools can be funded, always remembering with joy that Jesus did not count the cost when He offered His life for our salvation. We do well, then, to make the financial support of the Lord's work our priority, using the Old Testament tithing as a model, giving Him what is right, not what is left.

“We give Thee but Thine own, whate'er the gift may be; all that we have is Thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from Thee” (TLH 441:1).

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Luke 17:11-19 (NKJV)

Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

So when He saw them, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”

And He said to him, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.”

THE COLLECT

Keep, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy Church with Thy perpetual mercy; and because the frailty of man without Thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by Thy help from all things hurtful and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Initially the enemies of Jerusalem resorted to scorn, mockery, and disdain for Nehemiah and the people. The enemies of God's people upgraded their weapons from words to swords. They conspired to attack Jerusalem in order to inspire confusion and dismay. Nehemiah responded in faith, praying to God for protection. He also reorganized the workers and armed them. With one hand the men worked, and with the other hand they held their weapon. Each person was to dwell within Jerusalem, as well.

Nehemiah shows us the constant vigilance the Church in all ages must possess. Corporately and individually, we must not lay aside the weapons of our warfare against the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. We are to live within the church, receiving the gifts of Christ, and finding rest for our weary souls in absolution. But we are also to "take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:17-18). The Evil Triumvirate (sin, death, and the devil) always seeks our fall and ruin. But the One with whom we dwell in the heavenly Jerusalem, the Church, is far greater than our enemies. The Triune God will be with us in our fight and give us the victory by faith in Christ Jesus.

We pray: Lord God, grant unto us constant vigilance, so that we may fight temptation, the devil's accusations, and the world's influence with the Word of God and the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Jesus name, amen.

Hezekiah had been courageous and faithful, and what did he get for it? Sennacherib and his Assyrian army came against Jerusalem to make war! Swiftly and resolutely, Hezekiah removed all vital water sources from enemy access, strengthened fortifications, and made weapons and shields in abundance. How the people's hearts must have quaked within them when Sennacherib's messenger taunted them and their God from outside the walls. But Hezekiah encouraged them, assuring them that the enemy was merely flesh and blood and that the Lord was with them. In contrast to the revelation given to Elisha's servant in Dothan of the vast angelic army protecting them, reassuring him with their mere presence, here, though not visible to the eye, the Lord sent an angel into action, disabling the mighty army by cutting down their leadership. Sennacherib returned home, ashamed and confounded, to be slain by his own offspring in the temple of a god who could not protect him.

When we cry out in fear, "Make haste, O God, to deliver me," what power there is to remember in our distress that He is "by our side upon the plain" and that, although the arm of flesh will fail us, Christ's grace suffices for us and His strength is perfected in weakness.

"With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected. But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabbath Lord, and there's none other God; He holds the field forever." (TLH 262:2)

THE HOLY GOSPEL **St. Luke 10:23-37 (NKJV)**

Then He turned to His disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see; for I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it."

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?"

So he answered and said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself."

And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.'

So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?

And he said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

THE COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and that we may obtain that which Thou does promise, make us to love that which Thou does command; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

As soon as Jerusalem began to be built up, opposition arose. Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab laugh the Judahites to scorn. Their attack consists of words. They despise Jerusalem and her God. They question Nehemiah's authority to do the work, accusing Him of rebelling against the king. Yet Nehemiah rebuffed their accusations and mockery with the shield of faith, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem." Nehemiah was called by God, through the king, to perform this task. He would build up Jerusalem in spite of the enemy's assaults.

When we consider that the Old Testament Jerusalem is a prefiguring of the New Testament Church we can see the parallels. In every generation there are attacks on this heavenly Jerusalem. False teachers war against the fortifications of the heavenly city using human reason and imagination. The world mocks the Church as she fortifies herself with the true doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. Yet in every generation the Lord calls men to survey the damage done and to repair the breaches with the Holy Gospel. Our pastors are then to rebuild and fortify that which the devil has broken with sin and the false prophets have weakened by their teaching, so that God may be glorified and souls gathered into this Jerusalem through the pure Gospel of the forgiveness of sins.

We pray: Lord God, preserve Your Church on earth, frail though she may seem, and fortify us by Your heavenly doctrine against the devil, world, and our flesh, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Nehemiah's prayer is rooted in the promises of the Lord given in Holy Scripture. In his godly sorrow and contrition Nehemiah recalls the word of promise given to Israel before entering the Promised Land and beseeches the Lord to remember that word of promise. The Lord had said, "The LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you. Then the LORD your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers" (Deuteronomy 30:3-5). Nehemiah's prayer is that God would fulfill His promise.

We are to pray in the same manner, recalling the promises given to us in Holy Scripture. We pray daily for the forgiveness of sin because the Lord promises absolution when we repent. We pray for compassion, guidance, all the necessities of this life. We pray that the will of God be done and Satan's will be broken, because all of these promises, and many more, have been given to us in Scripture. Praying thus, we are confident that the Lord will grant our prayer for Christ's sake, because He is a God who delights in fulfilling His promises.

We pray: Lord, grant us faith so that we may ask for those good things which You have graciously promised to us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The reforms of King Josiah teach us the daily reformation of every Christian. As a youth Josiah began to seek the Lord. This led him to cast out the idols from the land and purge the false worship practices belonging to idols.

Having removed the false gods and their worship, Josiah next set his sights on restoring the true worship of the Lord. Josiah reestablished worship according to God's commands through Moses. Now the Lord could once again communicate His holiness to His people through the Divine Service of the Jerusalem Temple.

Finally, upon hearing the Book of the Law, Josiah tore his clothes in true repentance. His repentance did not lead to despair. He sought the Lord's mercy, sending emissaries to the prophetess. Huldah gave Josiah a word of Law and Gospel. Judgment would come, but he would be spared from that dreaded day.

Josiah's progression teaches us how we are to seek the Lord. We are to seek the true God, forsaking the idols we harbor in our hearts. We are to tear down the false gods, those things in this life we trust for every good thing. Then we are to worship the Lord as He ordains, receiving His gifts in the Divine Service. There we hear the message of Law that judges our sinfulness, and like Josiah we hear the Gospel that God, in Christ Jesus, has mercy upon penitent sinners. This is our daily and weekly pattern.

We pray: Dear Father, work true repentance in our heart every day, that we may forsake our idols and trust in You for every good thing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What the Lord requires, the Lord provides. In Exodus 12:3 the Lord commands that every man shall take a lamb from his own flock to be His family's Passover Lamb. In the days of Josiah, when the Passover had become a thing of distant history, Josiah reestablished the Passover amongst God's people and did so at His own expense (verse 7). What the Lord required, a lamb in this instance, the Lord provided through Josiah. This is a picture of how our Lord deals with us. We cannot afford the sacrifice for our sins. The ransom for the life of man is too great for any sinner to accomplish. In sheer grace and mercy, the Lord provides a Passover Lamb for us, our Lord Jesus Christ, to atone for our sins and rescue us from the bondage of Satan and sin.

Having made atonement for our sins, the Lord then requires faith as that which apprehends the blessings Christ earned on the cross as our Passover Lamb. Once again, we cannot create faith in our heart or conjure up trust in Christ's merit and atonement. But praise be to God, that which He requires He freely bestows on us! He works faith in our hearts through the means of grace, giving us Christ's merits and giving the means to possess those merits for our salvation.

We pray: Dear Father, thank You for the merits of Jesus, which You bestow upon us through faith. Keep us always in this faith that we may possess the merits of Jesus as our own, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

After Josiah's death Judah reestablished her evil ways. Josiah's sons, the final four kings of Judah, did evil in the sight of the Lord. They had seen the example of their father Josiah, yet rejected his reforms and turned to the wisdom of the sinful flesh. The Lord sent prophets to turn the hearts of these kings from their own wisdom to the worship of God, but each refused. Their stubborn refusal led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of many people. These kings are an illustration of what St. Paul writes in Romans 8:13, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die." However, the Lord is faithful to His Word even when His people are not. He remembers His promise of restoration, which He spoke to the prophet Jeremiah, and brought His penitent people out of captivity back into the Promised Land.

Living according to the flesh kills, but the Lord makes sinners alive through repentance and faith. As God's Christians we must daily repent of our sins when confronted with the Word of God, lest we continue to live according to the wisdom and lusts of the flesh and die. Our Lord is gracious to give us pastors to preach God's Law and Gospel to us, that though our sins are great, our Savior's merits and atonement are greater. Through faith God justifies the penitent ungodly and releases us from the captivity to our sins and the devil.

We pray: Father, teach us Thy way of Law and Gospel, of judgment and forgiveness, that we may daily repent of our sins and believe the Gospel for our salvation, through Jesus Christ. Amen.