

Daily Devotions

Monday August 21

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. ⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— ⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. ⁸Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

For Reflection

Christians often fall into the trap of thinking about an “Old Testament God” or an “Old Testament faith” over against a “New Testament God” or “New Testament faith.” The biggest problem with this (and there are many, many problems with it!) is that neither Jesus himself nor any of the New Testament writers would have understood what anyone could possibly mean by that. When the New Testament writers talk about “Scripture,” they mean the Scriptures of Israel, what we call the Old Testament. The God whom Jesus calls “Father” and who raised Jesus from the dead is, exactly, the God of Israel who called Abraham, set Israel free from Egypt, and spoke through the Law and Prophets. Jesus regularly quotes the Old Testament as authoritative, even if he interprets it differently than the Pharisees of his day did.

Why is that important for this reading? Because the biggest difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is not that “God was angry then, but is loving now,” but that in the Old Testament, the people of Israel are God’s chosen ones, while in the New Testament, this extends to anyone, regardless of ethnicity, who believes in Jesus. And we see the seeds of this shift first in the Old Testament, especially in this passage from Isaiah. Here, the Lord speaks a remarkable promise: Gentiles will be welcomed in the house of the Lord! Those who Israel would be tempted to view as enemies will be embraced!

Now, Isaiah's prophecy is even bolder than this. Gentiles will be gathered into the chosen community. But they will also be transformed. They will walk in the ways of God. They will still be Gentiles, but their worship and behavior will follow the covenant of the Lord. God will overcome the enemies of Israel by converting them and bringing them into the faith community of Israel.

Questions for Reflection

1. Who is someone who either you would be tempted to think of as an "outsider" or who might think of themselves as outside of God's love? What does this prophecy from Isaiah say about that?
2. Now, most people reading this are Gentiles. And we are shaped by a Gentile culture. So what are changes that need to happen in you to "hold fast the covenant" of the Lord? Where do you need to repent?

Read Psalm 95-97

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for victims and communities grieving from gun violence. Pray for the safety of all people, for reasonable laws, and for resources to combat the mental health crisis in America.

Tuesday August 22

Read Psalm 98-101

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for all those who travel over the summer, and for all who offer hospitality to travelers. Ask God to be with students and teachers on summer break, and for workers in every profession to find times of rest and refreshment during this season. Pray that young people and their families will experience joy together, that neighbors will get to know each other better as they spend time outdoors, and that people everywhere will delight in and care for God's creation.

Wednesday August 23

Psalm 67

¹May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us,

²that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

³Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁴Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

⁵Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁶The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

⁷May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

For Reflection

This psalm is a little long to read at the end of every worship service, but it would be neat if we could! Did you notice how it begins with words that are very similar to our Benediction (which comes from Numbers 6:24-26)? At the end of worship, the Benediction is pronounced to the congregation as people prepare to go back to their daily lives in the world. It helps us remember that we go with God's face shining on us and with God's blessing.

This psalm gives us even more encouragement as it explains *why* we are blessed and sent: "that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations" (v. 2). That's quite a commission that comes with our blessing from God! It's a responsibility and a privilege to serve the Lord so others may know God's way of peace and love. The remainder of this psalm urges the people to praise God and sing for joy. What are some of your reasons for praising God today?

Questions for Reflection

1. What goes through your mind when you hear the Benediction spoken to you at the end of every worship service?
2. This psalm is global in scope, as it talks about all nations, all the peoples, and all the earth. Do you have experiences of worshiping with or meeting Christians from other countries or cultures? How does being part of the worldwide Christian church influence your image of God and God's kingdom?
3. How has God guided you in his way lately? Are there decisions you've faced or next steps you've discerned? How do you sense God's leading in those situations? How would you like God to continue to lead and guide you in his way?

Read Psalm 102-103

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for the ministry of Reformation Lutheran Church, that we would be devoted to serving God, bearing witness to the Gospel so that others may come to believe, and serving our community so that we may bless others.

Thursday August 24

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

For Reflection

In this part of Romans, Paul is wrestling with one of the most important questions in the New Testament: since Gentiles had started to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah of Israel and the world, but most Jews had not, what does that mean for Israel's status? If they reject the Messiah, are they still God's people? The end of Romans 11 reflects his conclusions: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." In other words, God will not take back his promise to his chosen people Israel. Even "their disobedience" does not negate God's love.

This may seem like an obscure theological argument. But it brings to the surface an essential truth for Christians: our hope is never based on anything we do, even on our own faith. Our hope comes from the faithful mercy and love of God. Even when our faith falters, God does not. Even when we wander, God still claims us. Jesus went as far as possible – to death and hell – to rescue us, and he will not fail to deliver us. Our hope is not in any earthly victory. Not in how numerically "successful" Christianity is, not in any political outcomes, not in any moral or cultural achievements. Our hope is that Jesus Christ has defeated sin and death for us. This is our joy! Let us never be afraid, and let us never despair

Questions for Reflection

1. What is a time when your faith has been weak? How do these promises of God give you encouragement?
2. There's a difference in the faith of someone who is motivated by a fear of God's rejection and the faith of someone who is motivated by joy and thankfulness for God's grace. Which do you think motivates you more? How can you focus more on the promise of God's grace and goodness?

Read Psalm 104

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for the spiritual growth of yourself and all our members, that we would be filled with the Holy Spirit, increase in our knowledge of God's will, and overflow in love for each other and the world around us.

Friday August 25

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

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

For Reflection

This is a puzzling story. When we think of Jesus, we think of love and compassion. It's strange that he initially refuses to help this woman and her daughter. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus instructing his twelve apostles to go to only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:6). Then Jesus tells the woman the same thing about his own mission.

Was Jesus insensitive to the woman because she was a Canaanite (not a person of Israel) and therefore outside the scope of his mission? Was

he simply staying focused on his original audience? Whatever his reasons were, the woman didn't accept his refusal. She persistently asked Jesus to free her daughter from the demon. Her faith in Jesus never wavered. He said, "great is your faith" (v. 28) and then granted her request.

It's natural for us to imagine ourselves in the place of the woman, seeking help from Jesus. But for this devotion today, imagine you are in Jesus' place. You have your hands full with so many demands and responsibilities that you can't dream of taking on one more thing. When someone asks for your help, you brush them off. With everything else you're trying to juggle, they just aren't a priority. But they persist. Seeing the depth of their need with fresh eyes, somehow your heart expands. Your hands get bigger, and you find you are able to handle their request. You are able to help after all, and both of you are blessed. Maybe that has happened to you before, or maybe one day it will. How does an experience like that help your faith grow?

Questions for Reflection

1. What details do you notice about this story? What questions does it raise for you and your faith?
2. Put yourselves in the shoes of the disciples. What do you think they said to each other when Jesus decided to heal the woman's daughter after all? How do you think their understanding of Jesus was changed by this encounter?
3. When you feel like a fervent prayer is going unanswered, what past experiences of God's faithfulness give you strength and help you persist in prayer?

Read Psalm 105

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for peace in the world, especially in Ukraine. Ask God to sustain those who suffer under persecution for the name of Christ. Pray that all people would have freedom and good government.

Saturday August 26

Read Psalm 106

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for police, fire fighters, all emergency workers, health care workers, and those who serve in the military. Pray for farmers and those who transport food. Ask God to grant well-being to all in our community, and to stir up generosity to meet the needs of those who lack food, shelter, or other needs.

The Mission of Reformation Lutheran Church is to:

Invite our neighbors as Jesus invites us.

Engage in a community of graceful discipleship.

Equip our members to grow in faith and ministry.

Embody the love of Jesus in our world.

