

## A SENSE OF GOD'S HISTORY

Luke 7:18-35

Key Verse: 7:22,23

“So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.’”

In the last passage Jesus said to a widow whose only son had just died, “Don’t cry.” Then Jesus raised her son to life again. In this way, Jesus wiped the tears from her eyes. Jesus came to this world to carry our sorrows. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again on the third day to open the way to the kingdom of God for all who believe in him. There are no tears in the kingdom of God. There is no death or mourning or crying or pain. In Jesus we have no reason to cry. Therefore, we must not allow self-pity into our hearts. We must fix our eyes on Jesus who gives us living hope in the kingdom of God. Then we can serve the lost with a broken shepherd’s heart. Especially, we must serve children from broken families who cry uncontrollably, yet silently, in their hearts. May Jesus wipe every tear from their eyes through one-to-one Bible study.

In today’s passage, Jesus deals with the transitional period in God’s history from the time of John the Baptist to the time of Jesus. In doing so, Jesus teaches us the character of Christian faith. Jesus further explains the nature of God’s history. May God help each of us to have a sense of God’s history through this study.

First, John sends his disciples to Jesus for counseling (18-20).

Look at verse 18a. “John’s disciples told him about all these things.” Perhaps some of John’s disciples had followed Jesus and seen him raise the dead young man to life. No doubt, they heard people’s talk about Jesus. People compared Jesus to the great prophet Elijah, who raised a dead young man to life through prayer (1 Ki 17:22). People acknowledged that God had come to them through Jesus. This news about Jesus was being spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. John’s disciples went to John and told him about all these things.

At that time, John was in prison for rebuking the adultery of King Herod and the devilish Herodias (Lk 3:19-20). Once considered a “Messiah candidate,” John was now sitting in prison. No doubt, his enemies, who did not like to hear the word “repent,” were comforting their wounded egos. They must have used this opportunity to raise groundless accusations against John. When a great man of God comes upon adverse times, many small men make use of the situation to try to justify their petty lifestyles. John himself was okay. He knew why he was in prison. He had accepted God’s sovereignty with absolute faith and trust (Jn 3:30). But his disciples were not okay. They were disheartened when they saw their beloved master behind prison bars. They were confused when Jesus did not come to help John in his difficult situation. But worst of all, they had a hard time when they saw Jesus’ disciples. Until now, they could look down on Jesus’ disciples, who never fasted and prayed. But now, Jesus’ disciples had received all the privileges from Jesus, while John’s disciples were like a fifth wheel. To make matters worse, all the people who had followed John were now flocking to Jesus and his disciples.

John must have sensed the trouble in his disciples’ hearts. Their real problem was that they did not know who Jesus was. The best way to help them was to send them to Jesus. Look at verses 18b-19. “Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” The purpose of the question was to ascertain the facts that John’s mission as the forerunner had been completed and that Jesus had come as the promised Messiah to carry on God’s salvation work. How did Jesus answer?

Second, the work of God is going on (21-22).

Look at verse 21. “At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.” Jesus was doing the work of the Messiah before their very eyes. Once, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him. Once, Jesus was in the synagogue teaching the word of God. Suddenly a man with an evil spirit cried out at the top of his voice, “Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Then Jesus said sternly to

him, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" And the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. Another time, Jesus met a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. Then he sent him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man went and washed and came home seeing. He said, "I was blind, but now I see! Praise Jesus!" Isaiah 35:5-6a describes what the Messiah would do when he came. These verses say, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy."

It was obvious that Jesus was the Messiah. But he did not say to John's disciples, "Yes, I am the one." Perhaps Jesus was not ready to make a public claim to be the Messiah. More likely, Jesus wanted John's disciples to have faith based on the fulfillment of the Scriptures which they could see with their own eyes. Look at verse 22. "So he replied to the messengers, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.'" Only Jesus the Messiah could give sight to a blind man, make the lame walk and raise the dead. The work of the Messiah was going on according to God's will and purpose. This was good news of great joy to all mankind, including John's disciples.

The great work of God was going on right before the eyes of John's disciples. But they had been discouraged by John's imprisonment. They wondered how the evil power of the world could be allowed to prevail over the righteous man, John. And why did they have to be unemployed? Jesus really wanted to open their spiritual eyes to see that God's work was going on according to God's plan and purpose. When they saw God in Jesus, all their problems would be solved.

In history, there have been many who overcame their own personal problems and gained spiritual insight to see the work and history of God. The prophet Isaiah was not always a prophet. Once he was a man of deep despair who uttered many unbelieving words and complaints. But one day he entered the temple and saw God Almighty seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:1-3). Then a holy one brought burning coals and touched his lips; his sins were forgiven and he was cleansed. Isaiah realized that God Almighty rules the world to accomplish his own will and purpose. From that time on, he proclaimed the message, "Your God reigns!" (Isa 52:7)

After a lifetime of service to Jesus, the Apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos amidst severe persecution. He was a very old man and his conditions were terrible. But he was not overcome by his own problems or harassed by the suffering of his sheep. Rather, he saw Jesus ruling the world and the vision of his coming in glory. John wrote in Revelation 1:7,8, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'"

Here we learn that to have a sense of God's history, we must meet the Holy God Almighty who is ruling the world to fulfill his redemptive purpose. Actually, the great work of God is going on all around us. We can see and hear it every Friday during the student leaders' meeting. One growing shepherdess had been sorrowful because of a broken relationship. She thought her broken heart would never be healed. But she testified that Jesus carried her sorrows. Now she is not boy-minded, but Jesus-minded and serves God's sheep as a one-to-one Bible teacher. One young man wants to learn the spirit of power and love and self-discipline in Jesus. Suddenly he lost his night job, which had made him too tired anyway. Then he claimed Matthew 6:33, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." He sought God first and depended on God for his security. In just two days, he found a much better job that is in the daytime. He experienced God's power. He has faithfully cared for one sheep; he prays to feed five sheep. The work of God is going on all around us.

However, there are many who cling to their own petty problems. Then they speculate and despair about their future and the future of America. They are spiritually blind. God is working mightily in America. Many have been called out of the darkness of sin into the marvelous light of Christ. This week 63 American delegates went to Korea for the World Mission Report 2002. As preparation, they wrote brief life testimonies which amounted to 180 pages in small letters. It was like publishing a book which is filled with the work of God in each one's personal life and ministry. The work of God is going on in our nation, America.

Third, blessed is the man who does not fall away (23).

Look at verse 23. “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” Simply speaking, this verse is Jesus’ promise of blessing to those who keep their faith in Jesus to the end. This blessing is spiritual joy and peace in our hearts and ultimately eternal life in the kingdom of God. This is what John’s disciples really needed. But to receive this blessing one must recognize the character of Christian faith and the nature of God’s history.

The goal of Christian faith is not to get practical benefits or to enjoy success in the world. The goal of Christian faith is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Those who believe in Jesus just to get practical benefit and then fall away when their situation is unfavorable can never receive the true blessing that God wants to give. John’s disciples had enjoyed a season of success and privilege. Now it was over. Jesus and his disciples became the main actors in God’s work and history. Jesus did not promise John’s disciples a new job. But Jesus did promise them true spiritual blessing when they kept their faith in God to the end.

God’s history is different from worldly history. Worldly history is characterized by Caesar’s throne. It looks mighty powerful but it crushes and destroys life. Inevitably, each reigning power gives way to the next and the glory and power of the preceding kingdom disappears completely. But God’s history is everlasting and life-giving. It is like the manger of Jesus. It looks small and insignificant. But it contains the life of God. And it remains forever. As John said, “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1Jn 2:17). What we do for Jesus may look small in the world’s eyes. But whatever is done for Jesus lasts forever.

One young man was happy when God blessed his Bible-teaching ministry with many growing sheep. But one day persecution came and many Bible students disappeared. At the same time, his coworker’s ministry began to bear abundant spiritual fruit. The young man struggled, wondering why God let his ministry disappear, while his coworker’s ministry began to prosper. Then he accepted Jesus’ word, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” He committed his life and ministry to Jesus’ hands with a decision to live for the glory of God no matter what visible result came about. With new joy and spirit he looked around to see how to serve God. Suddenly he was drafted to cowork with a truly great servant of God. Then he could grow spiritually in his inner man and serve God fruitfully. The time of adversity is the time when God opens new doors of spiritual service.

In Chicago, we have many great missionaries who remain in Jesus even though things do not go well for them. And to our surprise, they are truly joyful. Whenever we see Dr. Joseph Chung, he makes us laugh because he tells us some interesting story that builds us up spiritually. We may think that he enjoys abundant visible blessing. But this is not true. He has experienced heart-breaking events, one after another. Yet, he is joyful and victorious. When we remain faithful to Jesus, overcoming ourselves, he blesses us with inner joy and helps us grow spiritually to love God purely. Most of all he gives us eternal life. Jesus says, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”

Fourth, John the Baptist and the kingdom of God (24-28).

After John’s messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. It was to bring the crowd back to their senses. They had once flocked to see John the Baptist and recognized him as God’s servant. But now they were not sure about John. Jesus affirmed the fact that John was the forerunner of the Messiah who came in fulfillment of God’s word. Then Jesus said, “I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John....” What great recognition Jesus gave to John: the greatest of those born of women! It means he was greater than even Moses or David. It was because John had a great and holy mission and he lived up to God’s calling for him. He was born of elderly parents who were both descendants of the priestly line. He was the fruit of their lifelong prayer. He was set apart from birth by God and given the name John and the specific mission to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He lived a pure and poor life, first with his parents and then in the desert. He ate locusts and wild honey and wore clothing made of camel’s hair. He never had a single girlfriend or drank one drop of alcohol. He devoted his whole life to fulfilling his mission to prepare the way for the Lord through the message of repentance. His ministry stirred the whole nation Israel and prepared their hearts to receive Jesus. He rebuked King Herod to repent his adultery and stop being a bad influence. Then he was arrested and put in prison. Soon he would die a martyr’s death, sealing his lifelong service to God with his own blood. Indeed, John was the greatest of those born of women.

However, Jesus also said, "...yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." This was not to derogate the greatness of John. It was to point them to the kingdom of God. As great as John was, he was simply the forerunner of the Messiah. Now the Messiah had come and the kingdom of God had come through him. Those who accept Jesus as their Messiah with repentance and faith are born again by the Holy Spirit as God's children. Even the least of those born of God is greater than the greatest man born of women, John the Baptist. Jesus did not want the crowd of people to misunderstand John. Nor did he want them to idolize John. He wanted them to see John from God's point of view. John was the forerunner of the Messiah. Now, Jesus the Messiah came. And they could enter the kingdom of God through Jesus.

Fifth, spiritual tax collectors and childish religious leaders (29-35).

Look at verse 29. "(All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John.)" Ordinary people, even tax collectors, understood and accepted Jesus' words. They said "Amen" many times. They could see that God used John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus. Now Jesus had come as the Messiah of the world. How could they have this spiritual insight? It came when they humbly repented their sins before God and accepted John's baptism. In doing so, they acknowledged God's history and entered it. Then they could see what God was doing. We can enter God's history when we repent before God's word. Look at verse 30. "(But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)" The Pharisees and experts in the law knew many things about the Bible, but they did not acknowledge God's history through John and they did not repent. They remained spiritually blind and could not begin to see what God was doing in their time.

Jesus wanted to help these spiritually blind religious leaders to see themselves as God saw them. He compared them to children in the marketplace. They were not good children who studied hard, did their homework, practiced their musical instruments and ate and slept well. They were like children in the marketplace (the mall) who ate junk food and played video games all day long. They didn't like John, saying he was too holy and austere and didn't know how to have a good time. They didn't like Jesus because he wasn't sorrowful at funerals and enjoyed eating and drinking with sinners. Obviously, they would find means to criticize whoever God sent to help them. It was indeed tragic that the religious leaders were like that. But Jesus was comforted by the children of God. They had the wisdom to accept Jesus' words and hold on to them. In the end, they would stand out as the righteous children of God in a childish generation and give glory to God.

In this passage Jesus teaches us to have a sense of God's history. Anyone can have a sense of God's history. It begins when we repent before God's word like the tax collectors. It grows when we see what God is doing in others, especially in our nation and in the world. It grows all the more when we remain in Jesus for his own glory, overcoming ourselves. In the end it leads us to share in God's victory, as his glorious history triumphs over the deceit and destruction of worldly history. May God give you a sense of God's history and help you stand firm in it.