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**Sunday 22 August 2021 to Sunday 29 August 2021**

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Sunday 22 August 2021

# To whom shall we go?

by Marlene Cooper

**Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68).**

Read John 6:56–69

What makes a teaching hard? Can’t understand it? Too deep? Outside my experience? Don’t trust the teacher? Some or all of the above could definitely prevent my fruitful learning.

Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue drew the attention of a crowd of would-be disciples, but in the end, many couldn’t accept the lesson. It was just too hard. They left him, shaking their heads, grumbling, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ (verse 52). Jesus’ claim to be the ‘living bread come down from heaven to give life to the world’ (verse 51) was difficult, but when he told them that for eternal life, they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, that was too much!

Even his own disciples were taken aback. Yes, our ancestors ate the manna in the desert, and yes, they died.  But now, you tell us you are the living bread from heaven, and we must eat you to live forever? You say that’s the real food, the real drink? Without it, we have no life in us? Try as they might, they couldn’t fathom it.

Jesus knew their hearts. ‘My words are life-giving, of the Spirit’, he told them. ‘It’s not by intellectual effort that the truth is revealed to you’. Watching those leaving, he turned to the disciples. ‘Will you be going away as well?’ With faith overcoming uncertainty, Peter declared, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!’

By staying and trusting, especially when our Lord’s teaching seems unclear and even hard, we allow the Spirit of Life to reveal the truth of Jesus to us. We take the Lord’s Supper together, feeding on his body and blood in the bread and wine, receiving all the blessings he has won for us. In his living presence, we are nourished by the real food and drink we need. We find him to be indeed the Bread of Life, broken for this hungry and thirsty world in which we live. Staying, listening, following and trusting, we too can have the assurance that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life.

**Stay with us, Lord Jesus, Living Bread. You have the words and the power to make us truly alive as we feed on you, nourished for service in your kingdom, Amen.**

Monday 23 August 2021

# Listen and hear, look and see

by Marlene Cooper

**Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: the law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My salvation is on the way (Isaiah 51:4,5a).**

Read Isaiah 51:1–6

‘Sometimes a light surprises the child of God who sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings; when comforts are declining, he grants the soul again, a season of clear shining to cheer it after rain.’ So begins a beautiful William Cowper hymn written over 200 years ago. A light shines, a new perspective is gained.

Israel in exile, weary and disconsolate, was visited by a similar ‘clear shining’ from God who brought them a new perspective in exchange for their tears through a call to listen, hear, look and see.

First, God said to look back: ‘You are not ephemeral folk! You have been hewn from a rock. You are people covenanted with God through Abraham into an unshakeable promise and faithful love. Look and see your long story of his mercy and goodness to you, even when you didn’t realise it.’

Now, listen and hear: there is an instruction. God’s teaching is coming to you, Israel. It is a light that must go out to display his righteousness to the nations and the distant islands, to the whole world. Your mission is to be the light-bearer. ‘See that light on the horizon? My salvation is hurrying to you, my strong arm is ready to deliver you’, God tells them (verse 5).

Now, look ahead: ‘See what I have for you. There’s comfort, restoration, flourishing; there’s joy and gladness after your tears; there’s worship with thanksgiving, singing and new hope.’ ‘He will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord’ (verse 3). What a vision for Israel! It’s a ‘season of clear shining’, a new perspective, seeing things through God’s light.

Our Lord continues to surprise us today as he calls us to look and see what he has done for us. ‘Take heart!’ he says, ‘it is finished!’ God’s salvation has come, and Jesus reigns victorious over sin, fear, doubt, every burden and even death itself. His Spirit moves among us with ‘healing in his wings’, reminding us of the faithful love of God, making us light-bearers of salvation, cheering our hearts and offering us a new perspective on every circumstance. We are called again to look and see and listen and hear the gracious word of God, with our hope grounded in Jesus in whom we live and on whom we can rely.

**Lord Jesus, light of the nations, you have brought us into the clear shining of God’s presence, restoring and remaking us into your light-bearers and bringers of hope to our needy world. Continue to surprise us with your grace as we follow your call, seeing and hearing you as we live in your kingdom today, Amen.**

Tuesday 24 August 2021

# Move over for Jesus

by Marlene Cooper

**That joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less (John 3:39b,40).**

Read John 3:25–35

The disciples of John the Baptist loved their Rabbi. So, when they saw ‘that man’, the one John had baptised gaining a growing throng of followers, they were grieved. ‘Look,’ they complained, ‘everyone is going to him!’

Sadly, they had not understood John’s ministry nor did they perceive the unique and heaven-sent ministry of Jesus rising among them. John, the servant from the earth, knew that his was a passing ministry. Recognising Jesus as the one from heaven, teaching heavenly truth in a ministry without end, he knew that God’s time had come for him to move over in order to give place to the one ‘above all’.

And John was glad! The heavenly bridegroom had arrived, and now the best man’s work was done. ‘That joy is mine and it is now complete; he [Jesus] must become greater and I must become less.’

It is easy for us to slip into thinking that the work in God’s kingdom is all about us. But our work is always preparatory – we serve to prepare the way for the glory of God the Father, just as Jesus did during his earthly ministry. Whether our tasks are ‘great’, requiring intense energy and wisdom, leadership and decision-making, or ‘small’, like prayer, encouragement or quiet acts of kindness, our work has a divine purpose and heavenly timing. We serve beside the one from above. There will be times to step forward and times to step aside so that Jesus, the Bridegroom, remains the sole focus of our efforts.

Keeping connected to Jesus enables us to perceive and rejoice over the work of others who are serving with us. It reveals to us what he is doing among us today and enables us to respond to his call to join him there.  Whether it be for ‘great’ action or for ‘small’ tasks, the Spirit who calls and gathers us for service binds us together in mutual support and prayerful cooperation. As we wait on God’s direction and timing, working together in the love and energy the Spirit gives, we will have the joy of accompanying Jesus as he brings in the harvest of the kingdom for the glory of God the Father.

**Shine in our hearts, Holy Spirit of life, as we serve you together in your kingdom. Draw us and those we serve to Jesus the Saviour of the world, for the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

Wednesday 25 August 2021

# Witnessing with the Spirit

by Marlene Cooper

**We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:32).**

Read Acts 5:27–32

Those called to be witnesses in court may have to face fierce cross-examination to dismantle their testimony as inconsistent, irrelevant or even untrue. Those who survive this ordeal are often people with an unshakeable inner certainty that what they have said is, indeed, ‘the whole truth’.

After Pentecost, the Apostles were on fire with the power and love of God. Day by day, the company of believers grew in number in response to their preaching and healing ministries. Nevertheless, the opposition was strong and unrelenting. So, what enabled them to persevere and return for more? What impelled them to preach Christ tirelessly when so much was at stake for them?

Called to give an account of themselves, they spoke up from the unshakeable inner certainty of the truth and authority of the one they preached about: ‘We must obey God rather than human beings!’ (verse 29).  Boldly, they gave a nutshell account of God’s saving purpose fulfilled in Jesus, climaxing in the heart of their testimony: ‘We are witnesses of these things – and so is the Holy Spirit!’ (verse 32).

Their witness was not an earthly matter. It was a gift of the Spirit of truth, a gift of God. Rightly did the Pharisee Gamaliel perceive afterwards: ‘If it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God’ (verse 39).

To be a witness of salvation is always a gift of the Spirit received by faith. It is in Christ himself that we can have the inner certainty and assurance that our witness is powerfully true, a gracious rescue brought to the world for all. As a gift, it needs daily receiving and renewal as we humbly and penitently open our hands and hearts to receive the Spirit’s witness again. It is the Spirit who opens our eyes to see the living Jesus at work in our broken and sin-weary world.

Just as the Spirit witnessed with the Apostles, so he empowers and equips us as witnesses to our Saviour today. We are his witnesses, so let our account – whatever challenges we face – be the story of God’s mercy and goodness revealed in Jesus. We draw our unshakeable inner certainty from the Spirit of truth, whose gifts of grace and unfailing encouragement keep us in tune with the needs we meet wherever we are.

**Shine in our hearts, Holy Spirit of truth, as we serve as witnesses to the wonder of God’s saving love in Jesus. Remind us of Jesus’ presence as we give an account of our hope to those who long for his love. Amen.**

Thursday 26 August 2021

# Short time or long

by Marlene Cooper

**Paul replied, ‘Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains’ (Acts 26:29).**

Read Acts 26:19–29

Paul never missed an opportunity to testify to the faithfulness of God and the power of Christ in his life. In prison with serious charges against him, he was still ready to share the good news with ‘small and great alike’ (verse 22), among his own people and those of the Gentile world beyond. When called before the Jewish king Agrippa and the Roman governor Festus to give an account of himself, he grasped the chance to tell of God’s saving help for all in Jesus Christ.

This ardent testimony was bound to evoke a response, one way or the other. First, the governor shouts, ‘Paul, you’re mad! Out of your mind with all your learning!’ Then when Paul appeals to King Agrippa, the evasion is complete: ‘In such a short time, you think you can persuade me to become a Christian?!’ Not ready to receive the testimony, both fended off, unable to hear more.

Many of us pray for loved ones to hear and receive the gospel and come to Christ for his mercy and rescue. You may have shared your faith with someone who was not ready to receive the good news message. Perhaps you wonder whether your prayer or your testimony will ever bear fruit. Today Paul encourages us as he looks ahead in time to the church and its mission in our time, to ‘all who are listening to me today’. ‘Short time or long,’ he says, ‘however long it takes, I keep praying that you will know Christ as I do, living in his promise and power, his grace and peace’.

A seed can hide for a long time in the ground. Though we look for it, we may not see it sprouting and growing. But God is faithful. His mission in Christ continues today through the prayer and testimony of believers just as it did in Paul’s day. We pray on and tell the story again in hope. God is listening, and as Paul reminds us elsewhere, he is able to do all and far more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20), short time or long!

**Following you, dear Lord Jesus, we entrust our prayer and testimony for those you love into your gracious keeping. Stir up our faith in your promises and increase our zeal for your kingdom, coming among us by your grace again today. Amen.**

Friday 27 August 2021

# Like living stones

by Marlene Cooper

**You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Christ Jesus (1 Peter 2:4b).**

Read 1 Peter 2:4–10

A striking feature of farming areas in the north of England is the network of dry-stone walls crisscrossing the landscape. These walls, some ages-old, have been built to last come wind or weather. Skilled craftsmen choose the stones and their place within the wall with ancient wisdom. Essential to the structure and set into the walls at intervals are the vital ‘through stones’ – large penetrating stones, which serve as linchpins, holding each stone secure in the wall’s fabric.

Peter writes to believers experiencing the ‘great persecution’ (Acts 8:1). Their reliance on Christ has been threatened as they have fled into unfamiliar territory, losing the happy, supportive fellowship of their own congregations. ‘You are like living stones’, he writes. You are not scattered, lying loose across the field.  Rather, you are purposefully taken up to be set wisely into the walls of a spiritual house of God. Keeping these ‘stones’ secure and rock-steady in the wall is the mighty ‘through stone’, Christ, the immovable Cornerstone. He is the precious Chosen One, who, through his Spirit, works to unify believers into walls of a house built to last. Here, all the stones together ring out their praise and offer their prayer in a united service of worship.

What an image of grace! Living stones in a wall of praise! Interconnected for mutual support and encouragement. It graces us to live for others, invites us to sing, ‘Make us your building, sheltering others, walls made of living stone’\*. The events of life may sometimes cause us to feel unsteady, perhaps isolated and scattered, far from our spiritual home. But here is the assurance that we are in the Builder’s hands. No doubt or anxiety can separate us from his wisdom and love. The gift we receive daily as children of God’s love, through Christ our Cornerstone, holds us steady and secure in the walls of God’s house by the power and persistence of the Spirit who always builds to last.

**Lord Jesus, our unfailing Cornerstone, hold us close to you and to one another as you build us into the walls of God’s house. Open our hearts and lives to sing your praise together, resting in your wise and gracious hands when we meet the shocks and storms of life. Amen.**

\*Bernadette Farrell, 1993

Saturday 28 August 2021

# Who is fit?

by Marlene Cooper

**Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? (Psalm 15:1)**

Read Psalm 15

I marvel at the enormous commitment of athletes preparing major competitions. For example, to be eligible for the Olympic team demands a level of fitness and stamina far beyond the reach of most of us. I imagine that to excel at this level means taking on a fitness and training regime that must surely be all-consuming. What kind of people are those who actually make the team, I wonder?

The psalmist David ponders a similar question: who is fit to enter God’s house or even ‘dwell’ in the holy place of worship? The Message Bible asks more colloquially: ‘God, who gets invited to dinner at your place?  How do we get on your guest list?’ David provides a qualifying list. These virtues will open the door to the holy place and allow you to walk on God’s holy hill: walking blamelessly, living righteously, speaking the truth, never speaking ill of others, doing no harm, keeping promises, being honest in business and behaving honourably towards fellow-believers while avoiding anyone whose life doesn’t measure up (verse 2–4). And David concludes, ‘Those who tick these boxes will never have to worry – they’re in!’

Did you, like me, find yourself taking a mental step back as you read these words? Did you feel totally disqualified and unfit right from the start? Who on earth can meet this standard?

There is one – only one – who measures up. Jesus has offered his blameless life on our behalf. He is the one who is fit to climb the holy hill and enter the holy place. His cross reveals a level of ‘fitness’, love, purity and compassion none of us could achieve or imagine. He carried it to Calvary, taking us with him, so that by his dying and rising, God’s doors would always be open for us. In him, we may now go up to God’s house rejoicing, confident of a welcome.

So, what kind of people can get invited to dinner at God’s place? With Jesus, we are the people! We may enter the holy place with clean hearts and a full assurance of finding God’s grace ready to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Because of Jesus, we may live on God’s holy hill and dwell in his holy place because it is there that the cross of Jesus is the pledge that we are, indeed, on God’s guest list.

**Lord Jesus, thank you that you have opened the way for us to come joyfully into the Father’s presence. In all our need, may we find grace to help, mercy for sin and joy to worship as we come in with you. Amen.**

Sunday 29 August 2021

# Dirty disciples

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

**These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules made by men (Mark 7:6b,7).**

Read Mark 7:1–8,14,15,21–23

According to the Pharisees and some teachers of the law, Jesus’ disciples failed to conduct a ritual washing of their hands before eating. The disciples were dirty because they didn’t perform the tradition of the elders. Jesus’ response to them highlighted what it really meant to be clean. He wasn’t concerned about ceremonial washing but something far more important.

Jesus said that what needed attention was the real dirt deep down in us – the dirt on our hearts. Our brokenness, sin and rebellion against God is the real problem – and not whether we follow all the rules, traditions, and rituals handed down to us (as helpful and positive as they might be).

The holy and pure Lord Jesus comes to us and makes us clean. He comes to forgive, restore, renew and transform us into people who can reflect his love and grace – instead of just giving us rules to guide us.

And when this happens, we may find ourselves getting down and dirty and even liking it. We are enabled to look past our expectations of others, we can look above and beyond our regulations, policies and procedures, and we are challenged to become grubby in our service to others.

Dirty disciples roll up their sleeves and care for this world and the least of God’s children. They don’t worry about looks and appearances. Instead, they look into the eyes and hearts of their neighbours. Dirty disciples see God’s face in those around them rather than their imperfections, weaknesses and failures.

As cleansed, purified, justified and forgiven people, we can now serve those around us who need the love, grace and acceptance of Jesus.

Our hearts are clean because of Jesus. Others can now experience his mercy and endless love through us.

**Lord God, your Son humbled himself in obedience to your will and gave up his life for us. Transform and renew us within. Help us not to be conformed to this world but dedicate ourselves to you and do what pleases you. We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.**