



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 20

Proper 25 (C)

October 23, 2022

[RCL] Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Joel 2:23-32

This passage of apocalyptic poetry in Joel provides the hope and affirmation that the people of Israel need after their time of deprivation and suffering. In this case, the people had fallen prey to a devastating plague of locusts; that same sense of marginalization and loss is easily transferred to our own lives, whether at the personal level or on a larger or global scale.

We can all relate to some experience of suffering, and what we need to do with this passage is use Joel's prophecy to find a way through the darkness in our own lives. The salvation that he promises is available to "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord." True darkness, permanent darkness, will only come if we fail in our hope, in our belief, that God loves us and that his ability to restore is limitless.

- Try to think of a time in your life when things turned around after a long period of trouble or suffering. Looking back, can you see God's hand in that restoration?
- What part, large or small, can you play in helping to bring light to the darkness in someone else's life, or that of your community?

Psalm 65

Just as in the passage from Joel, Psalm 65 proclaims the power of God to forgive and restore. It is important to read carefully, however, and note that this is not a case of God as a vending machine, where he answers prayers and grants wishes at our command. Almost every line of the psalm reveals the power and strength wielded by the Lord. He provides, establishes, silences, crowns, waters, and blesses; but all of this comes in response to our penitence and hinges upon his forgiveness of our transgressions. His wondrous acts are reserved for those of true faith.

Once we commit ourselves, we can indeed rejoice, for even "those who live at the ends of the earth will tremble at [God's] marvelous signs."

- Where can you see a sign of God's hand in your life today?
- What unlikely place might you look for and appreciate his power and strength in your life tomorrow?

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

This portion of Paul's letter to Timothy gives us a sense of a one-two punch to the gut. First, he gives the sense that he is nearing the end of his life. He has "fought the good fight" and "the time of [his] departure has come." Before we can even wrap our minds around the idea of Paul's impending death, he deals a second blow as he reminds the reader that no one came to his defense when he was first accused, and that "all deserted [him]."

It is not Paul's intention, however, to send us on a guilt trip. Instead, we can look to his words for inspiration.

Throughout this long and arduous race, his faith has never flagged. He has fought the good fight. He has nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to be afraid of... and the even *better* news is that we can also aspire to "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, [gave him] on that day." We don't have to be exactly like Paul, but if we stay true to the teachings of Christ, then God will rescue us in the same way he rescued Paul "from every evil attack." We don't have to rely on earthly human support during our most difficult days, because God will be with us, no matter what.

- Can you think of a time when you were tired or frustrated and God's presence helped you complete the task at hand?
- How can you encourage others to look for God's support and love in their lives?

Luke 18:9-14

While the other passages this week point to the need for faith in somewhat ephemeral terms, these verses from Luke provide some clearly detailed requirements about the type of faith that God is seeking. He is not looking for perfection in our acts of faith. We are not saved by our actions, at least not when they are performed with the notion that we will receive some sort of "gold star" as a reward for our noble efforts. Quite the contrary; what God seeks is our trust, not in our own actions, but in his. His mercy is what will save us, and the way to that mercy is through true humility and the recognition that we are all sinners who need to repent instead of boast and serve instead of demand.

Humility is a difficult concept for many of us. It runs counter to much of what society teaches and demands of us each day, but that doesn't make it any less important. This Gospel lesson spells that out in no uncertain terms.

- What is one way that you might practice humility this week?
- Can you think of a time when you acted as the Pharisee in this parable? How might you turn that scenario around?

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