

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

NRSV

In the Hebrew Bible, life simply ended with death (or at best, the dead merely existed in an indeterminate state, separated from God), but during the first century BC, some Jewish thinkers developed the notion of after-life. Wisdom is in the Apocrypha or in the Old Testament: the Church has used it since the earliest times, but the Jewish authorities rejected it. It is quoted in the New Testament. The thinking is that, at the Last Judgement, the just (or righteous) will join God and the angels in heaven, but the unjust (or wicked) will be punished. 2:23-24 says: "... God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it".

But the "righteous" (v. 1) are protected by God, and after death, they will not suffer. To the wicked ("foolish", v. 2), they seem to have simply ceased to exist, to have been annihilated, but they are actually "at peace" (v. 3), with God and the angelic court. It may appear that they have been punished, but their certain hope in life and in death is to live for ever. Then v. 5: the hardship they have suffered in life is really *discipline*, a process of testing by God and being found acceptable to him, and a preparation for receiving "great good" from him. God's testing (v. 6) is like refining gold: when the ore is heated, the metal coalesces and the slag separates: a process of purification. Isaiah 53, a *Servant Song* (which we believe tells of Christ) speaks of a "lamb that is led to the slaughter ... there was no deceit in his mouth" and his life is "an offering for sin". This is the sense in which those who have died are a "sacrificial burnt offering" (v. 6). At the Last Judgement ("In the time of their visitation", v. 7) those who have died will triumph (shining and "sparks" are images of triumph.) V. 8a summarizes Daniel 7:18-27; in the context of Wisdom, it simply means that the just will rule over the wicked (although many Jews took Daniel as saying that, in the Messianic age, Israel, the just, would rule all other nations.) In the age to come, "the faithful" (v. 9), "those who trust" in God, will understand ultimate "truth", i.e. God, and will dwell in a loving relationship with him, because of his freely-given gift of love ("grace") to, and forgiveness of ("mercy") those he chooses.

Psalm 116:1-9

NRSV

The psalmist loves God for hearing him when he has prayed to him. whenever he has sought him out. God's past responsiveness will lead him to seek God's help lifelong. He recalls a time when he was physically, mentally and/or spiritually ill (v. 3). He felt trapped, as though "snares of death" had grabbed hold of him, dragging him towards the grave. (Birds were caught in *snares*, large nets.) He felt life, even his soul, his very being, slipping away from him. ("Sheol" was the place of

the dead where people retained only a semblance of life.) But then, he tells those present (possibly in the Temple): *I called out to God to save me* (v. 4). God protects those who approach him in humility ("the simple", v. 6). The psalmist's sickness brought him to this state. When restored by God, he could assure his soul that it was safe to return to him; God has given to him generously (v. 7), has rescued him from "death" (v. 8), or at least from sorrow and deviation from his ways. (Physical and spiritual illness were seen as closely connected.) Finally, he vows that he will be actively godly (v. 9).

1 Peter 1:3-9

NRSV

The author has addressed this letter to those "chosen and destined" (v. 2) by the Father and "sanctified" by the Holy Spirit in order "to be obedient to Jesus Christ" and to share in the forgiveness available through Christ's sacrificial death (v. 2). ("Blessed be ...", v. 3, is a traditional Jewish prayer form.) The Father, in his mercy, has caused us to be born again ("new birth", baptism) into a hope which is very much alive, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ". Our rebirth is also into "an inheritance" (v. 4): in the Old Testament, the inheritance was principally Palestine, but for the Church, it is heavenly. Palestine was lost in war, but our inheritance is "imperishable", indestructible, free from sin ("undefiled") and never lost. We, through our trust in God ("faith", v. 5) are guarded by God's power – for "salvation" – already accomplished but to be shown to all at the end of time ("last time"). In all of this (v. 6), the readers rejoice even if they have had to suffer "trials" (ostracism or persecution). These verify their faithfulness to God – as the purity of gold is tested by heating it. Such fidelity will be rewarded when Christ comes (to judge) at the end of time (v. 7). Their faith is such that they love him, believe in him and rejoice, even though they (unlike Peter) have never seen him (v. 8). Why? Because they are aware that they are being saved now – this being a logical and temporal goal of trust in God.

John 11:21-27

NRSV

Martha and Mary have sent for Jesus when their brother Lazarus, a follower, has fallen ill (v. 1). By the time Jesus has arrived, Lazarus is dead (v. 17). The two sisters live in Bethany, a village near the city of Jerusalem so many have come to mourn, as is their sacred duty. When Martha has heard that Jesus is about to arrive, she goes to meet him – perhaps to warn him of the rites – while Mary remains at home receiving condolences. Martha's words to Jesus (v. 21) are a rebuke, but they also express her confidence that Jesus would have healed Lazarus. V. 22 is a broad hint, which Jesus answers non-committally: Lazarus may "rise" (v. 23) at the end of time (as many believed). In v. 22, Martha echoes Pharisaic doctrine, and a position Jesus holds, but he modifies it (vv. 25-26). Jesus brings people to life ("resurrection") and is the principle of "life". The "life" after death he offers is *eternal life*; none who believe will be annihilated at the Last Day ("never die"). In v. 27, she echoes statements of faith made by Andrew, Nathanael and those at the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus does command Lazarus to come out of the tomb, which he does (v. 44). Lazarus resumes physical life.