

**Sermon Notes from the Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People**  
4th Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

**ACNA Readings** – Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:1-15(16-18); Romans 5:15b-19; Matthew 10:16-33

**Introduction.** This fourth Sunday after Pentecost follows scriptural readings that focus on a foundational principle of the Spirit-filled life – death to the flesh precedes life in the Spirit!

**Common Theme.** How can life in the Spirit require death? It may not seem obvious, so it will be helpful to explore the common theme in the readings today. In the Gospel reading, we discover the true disciple-follower of Yeshua must lose his/her life if s/he is to gain it! And in the epistle reading, the redeemed people of God have died to sin and now live for God. The intriguing first testament reading about Hagar and Sarah can be elucidated in the new covenant when read in this light.

**Genesis 21:8–21. Abraham had Two Kinds of Offspring.** It is interesting that Genesis 21 is the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, because of a midrash on verse 1 stating that “The Lord took note of Sarah” on that date (b. Rosh Hash. 11a: see JSB here), though there is no reference to this in the biblical text.

The wider context tells us Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born (v.5), and, according to Genesis 25:7, Abraham lived for 175 years. Based on this, JSB points out that Abraham’s life “divides into seven periods of 25 years each: three of them in Mesopotamia (12:4), one in Canaan without the promised son (21:5), and three in Canaan after Isaac’s birth (25:7). The period of his life in which Abraham lived without the promise unfulfilled, though the shortest, is the pivotal and central one and occupies the most space in the narrative.”

Children were weaned after two or three years in the ancient world, as the mother’s milk gave the best chance of avoiding infant mortality. Weaning then called for a celebration, especially for parents – as in this case – who had waited so long for a child (NET, n.15).

It helps in the understanding of the reading to know that there is a word-play in the Hebrew, based on the name given to Isaac (v. 3). Firstly, Sarah was overjoyed with the way the Lord had fulfilled his promise to her in her old age. She expressed her joy in these words (v. 6 literally): “Laughter (*tse-khoq*, צחק) God made for me. Everyone hearing will laugh (*yits-khaq*; צחק) with me.” The name Isaac means “he will laugh” and Sarah’s reference to laughter and everyone laughing is clearly intentional. But the preposition (*li*, ל) is repeated in both halves of the sentence and can mean *to*, *for*, *with*, or *at* me. So, Alter explains there is an ambiguity here: “All who hear of it may laugh, rejoice with Sarah, but the hint that they might also laugh at her is evident in her language.” The modern *street* saying—“You’re joking me!”—may capture the meaning well.

Then secondly, the verb used of Ishmael’s behaviour in verse nine is the same root as the name Isaac (צחק; he laughs) so is another pun (cf. 17:17; 18:12; 19:14; 26:8). Here, the verb form is intensive (*piel*), so may have the sense of mocking (as in Gen 19:14; 39:14, 17). JSB suggests another possible interpretation, that “Isaac-ing” could mean the same as “taking Isaac’s place.” Alter similarly says:

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“Sarah sees Ishmael presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, presuming to be the legitimate heir.” Hertz connects the weaning in verse eight with Ishmael’s mocking in verse nine saying: “Ishmael laughed derisively at the feasting and rejoicing over the child Isaac, inasmuch as he was the elder son and the heir to his father’s estate. Hence Sarah’s natural desire to drive him out of the house.” Either way, Sarah felt Ishmael’s behaviour was intimidating and sinister and was determined to stop it immediately.

Notice, too, the contrasting parallel between the wording of verses three and nine (literal translation):

Abraham	called	the name of his son	the one being born to him,	
			that Sarah bore to him	
				Isaac (= he laughs).
Sarah	saw	the son	of Hagar the Egyptian	
			that she bore to Abraham	
				laughing (Isaac-ing).

So the narrator tells us that both women bore a son to Abraham, but of Isaac, it starts: “the one being born to him (Abraham),” but of Ishmael, it starts “the son of Hagar the Egyptian,” emphasising his low social status. This continues in verse ten with Sarah showing the depth of her contempt by omitting the names of the two individuals who have aroused her jealousy (JSB). Notice also the way the word-play on the name Isaac is held to the end of both sentences, for emphasis.

Although the passage says that “the matter was very wrong/evil in the eyes of Abraham on account of his son” (v.11 literally), God said to him – maybe in a dream during the night, see the start of verse 14 – “Let it not be wrong/evil in your eyes about the lad and your handmaid. All that Sarah is saying to you, obey her voice, for in Isaac will be called to you seed.” This indicates that God’s promises to Abraham will be realised through Isaac. It is also interesting to see the contrast here between Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah. God criticised Adam “because you listened to the voice of your wife,” instead of listening to God’s voice, but here, God says to Abraham “all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice,” because Isaac is indeed the chosen heir, not Ishmael. However, despite Sarah’s intentions, God explains that Ishmael will indeed inherit a substantial portion of the promise to his father (v. 13; also 17:20; 21:18).

In the second half of the narrative – when the water runs out and Hagar thrusts Ishmael under a bush out of view to die – she weeps uncontrollably, but obviously Ishmael was groaning or crying out as well. We are told that God hears or listens to the voice of the lad. There is another clear play on the name here – Ishmael means “God hears” or “May God hear” (*yishma-ēl*, יִשְׁמָעֵאל - see ch. 16), and, although the name Ishmael is not used overtly in the passage, Alter notes: “the ghost of its etymology—“God hears”—hovers at the center of the story.” How wonderful to know that God hears our voice right in the context where we are (v.17), even if hidden under a bush!

This Genesis story is given figurative significance in the New Testament (see Gal 4:21–31), drawing an analogy on the two sons of Abraham – the one by the slave woman, Hagar, and the other by the

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free woman, Sarah. Paul points out that one son came via human, carnal motivations, but the other was as a result of the divine promise. It says the two women can be taken to represent two covenants – Hagar, corresponding to those in the *now*, earthly Jerusalem, and also Sarah, corresponding to those in the *above*, heavenly Jerusalem. Paul is equating the Jewish false teachers from Jerusalem, who wanted to keep the Galatian believers under the law (v. 21), with the children of the slave woman. Still, he insists the Galatian believers equate to the children of God's promised Son, the children of the free woman. The Galatian believers – and Yeshua followers since – are “children of the free woman” and “children of promise” (v.28, 31) obviously, by implication, because they are the offspring of Yeshua, God's promised Son. This approach by Paul is typological, contrasting two historical realities – the earthly and the heavenly with the physical and the spiritual – as fulfilled in the promised Son. The now-Jerusalem with its temple, sacrifices, and priesthood had now come to the end of its purpose, as the Messiah had come, and he is our sanctuary, sacrifice, and great high priest.

The mention of Hagar the Egyptian (v.9) wandering in the wilderness (v.14), moving in the wilderness southwards towards Egypt (v.20–21), and taking an Egyptian wife for Ishmael adds to the NT application. The Egyptian mother took a wife for her son from her native land, “From her own family, [as] she saw he was separated from his father's family” (Kimhi in Carasik, 188). The narrative emphasises that Hagar's Egypt-worldly origins continue in her worldly aspirations for her offspring. On the other hand, those in the new covenant have aspirations for “the Jerusalem above, and she is our mother” (Gal 4:26).

Alter also notes that there are numerous verbal parallels between this story of Ishmael (ch.21) and the one in the next section about Isaac (ch. 22). This is reflected in Kline's Woven Torah (Gen 21:1–21 parallel to 22:1–19; 128–129). The near-death of Ishmael is presented in parallel to the near-death of Isaac and both are saved by God's intervention. There is, no doubt, much here for meditation and application.

**Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17. The Pillow of Sovereignty.** NBC entitles this Psalm, “The Pillow of Sovereignty” and introduces it so:

Seven times (3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15) David speaks of the Lord, using the word [Adonai] which expresses the sovereignty of God. In personal need (1), in the day of my trouble (7), when the arrogant and ruthless (14) were hot against him, he found a pillow on which to lay his head: the Sovereign God who would hear his prayers (3–4), deliver him (12-13) and put his foes to shame (17). In this psalm of protracted intercession, the need (14) is not specified until David has first explored his relationship with God (1–6) and renewed his commitment (11–12). At a deeper level we may say that his prayer is more occupied with ‘telling God about God’, dwelling meditatively on the divine nature, than with ‘telling God about me’. In this it mirrors the way people pray in the Bible (Neh 9:5–31, 32–37; Acts 4:24–28, 29–30) and is a model for us.

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Throughout the psalm, the *I* and the *You* are often strongly expressed in emphatic independent pronouns. The words *poor and needy* are common terms and may refer to his economic status but may also refer to his sense of exposure, needing help and protection from God – as did Hagar and Ishmael in the previous reading.

Alter points out that verses nine to ten move from henotheism to monotheism – from the belief that other gods exist but are feeble in power compared with YHWH, God of Israel, to the belief that affirms that “You alone are God.”

The words in verse 16 “Turn to me and be gracious to me” are a paraphrase of the middle of the priestly blessing found in Numbers (Num 6:25, JSB). And the phrase “the son of your female servant” is used of a son born to a secondary wife or concubine (Exod 23:12; also Ps 116:16) – again, as in the story about Hagar. “The phrase may be used metaphorically and idiomatically to emphasise the psalmist’s humility before the LORD and his status as the LORD’s servant. Or it may be a reference to the psalmist’s own mother who also was a servant of the LORD” (NET, note 23).

The following clause in verse 17 is literally: “Work with me a sign for good” (also Judg 6:17) means “Show me a sign of your favour.” No doubt, we often find ourselves praying a prayer like this – show me a sign for good – as we seek assurance that God is with us even in difficult times. Maybe Hagar and Ishmael prayed words like this out of their desperation, and indeed God heard them right where they were!

**Romans 6:1b–11. Die to Sin and Live to God.** This reading gives theological amplification of the truth of sanctification through death. It is illustrated with a number of metaphors: circumcision, the passing through the Red Sea and through Jordan, the story of Hagar and Ishmael, and of course, in the new covenant through baptism and eucharist. The flesh or carnal nature is cut off – or cast out – and we die to our previous life in *Egypt* and enter into our inheritance in the promised land.

And baptism for new covenant believers has the same significance according to verse three. As far as God is concerned, sin and the rebellious person have been put to death and buried in the Messiah’s death and burial, and now we have been raised in his resurrection to walk in newness of life, as children of the promise. The language is uncompromising – our old humanity has been crucified with him ... destroyed.

The contrast between the two clauses in verse 11 is very pronounced in the original Greek: “Likewise, you, count yourselves dead, on the one hand, to sin, but living, on the other, to God, in Christ Jesus.” So, now that we are “in Christ Jesus,” we are called to regard ourselves dead to sin, but living to God! Reflecting on the Genesis reading again, Abraham’s fleshly behaviour resulted in carnal offspring – which had to be removed, however painful, if he was to live in the good of the promised son.

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**Matthew 10:24–39. Allegiance to Yeshua our Absolute Priority.** This Gospel reading is set in the context of Jesus sending out the twelve disciples on their first mission (10:1). The priority was to go to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6) – as Jesus did (15:24). This allusion to the lost sheep of Israel probably comes from Jeremiah, where the nation had been abandoned by their shepherd-leaders and allowed to go astray (see Jer 50:6, also Isa 53:6; Ezek 34). Given the specific context, we must be cautious about applying it to the mission at all times. The Great Commission after the resurrection (28:18–20) makes it clear the Gospel is now for “all people-groups,” and not just for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Jesus himself (note, “behold, I,” v. 16) was sending them like sheep amongst wolves, so they must be prepared for persecution. “This imagery of wolves is found in intertestamental Judaism (see Pss. Sol. 8:23, 30; also 1 Enoch 89:55)” (NET, n. 34). Also, they are to be crafty as serpents – proverbial, going all the way back to Genesis 3:1 – and harmless as doves – symbols of purity, integrity and harmlessness (NET, n. 35–36). Jesus warned them that they may face judgment in the local synagogue councils – later called Beit Din, lit: house of judgment, see Mishnah Sanhedrin: responsible for justice in the Jewish community going back to Deut 16:18–20 – and they may face flogging, which was customary punishment for such courts (Matt 23:34; Mishnah Makkot 3.12). But they were also likely to face Gentile judgment (v.18) as happened, for example, in Acts 25:2–12, 24–27.

Jesus gives his disciples a wonderful promise in such situations: What you are to say will be given to you, “the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you.” See Numbers, where the Spirit came on the 70 elders in Israel to enable them to speak (Num 11:25). Now, since Pentecost and the coming of the indwelling Spirit, all Yeshua’s disciples can claim this promise and trust that the Spirit of the Father will speak his word through them!

JANT explains that the word Beelzebul is from Hebrew, meaning “lord of lofty abode,” and that it was a Canaanite god. His name was changed pejoratively to Beelzebub – *Lord of the flies* – in 2 Kings and was later associated with the demonic in early Jewish and Christian tradition (2 Kgs 1:2-3,6,16 T. Sol. 3.6; 6.1–2; Origen, Cels. 8.25).

The passive verbs revealed and made known (v. 26) suggest the revelation comes from God. The text is both a warning about bad things being revealed and an encouragement that good things will be made known (NET, n.57). The words “proclaim from the housetops” is an idiom. “Roofs of many first-century Jewish houses in Judea and Galilee were flat and had access either from outside or from within the house. Something shouted from atop a house would be heard by everyone in the street below” (NET, n.59).

Further, Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body” – a similar exhortation is found in 4 Maccabees, reflecting the view of Judaism in the intertestamental period (4 Macc 13:14-15). The statement here assumes there is more to a person than a body. As Nolland says, “Fear of God is to

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displace fear of death-dealing persecutors. The stakes are higher with God” (Nolland, 436). And Hebrews adds: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).

The word *hell* here in Greek is *Gehenna*, and is based on the Hebrew *Gehinnom* – a valley south of Jerusalem associated with child sacrifice (2Kings 23:10; Jer 7:31; 2Chr 28:3; 33:6). *Gehinnom* later became associated with purgatory and/or hell, where the wicked – according to some traditions – are tortured after death. (see JANT, Matt 5:22 note).

“The penny refers to an *assarion*, a small Roman copper coin. One of them was worth one-sixteenth of a denarius or less than a half-hour’s average wage. Sparrows were the cheapest items sold in the market. The point of Jesus’ statement is that God knows about even the most financially insignificant things; see Isa 49:15” (NET, n.63). And “This is a typical form of rabbinic argumentation, from the lesser to the greater: If God cares about the lesser thing (sparrows) how much more does he care about the greater thing (people)” (NET, n.64).

“For rhetorical reasons, Jesus’ statement [v.34] is deliberately paradoxical (seeming to state the opposite of Matt 10:13 where the messengers are to bring peace). The conflict implied by the sword is not primarily eschatological in this context, however, but immediate, and concerns the division and discord even among family members that a person’s allegiance to Jesus would bring (vv. 35–39, quoting Mic 7:6)” (NET, n.69). Many Jews face the same challenge today if they confess Yeshua as Messiah, but Jesus is calling every believer to “lose his life for my sake” and so find it! The Spirit-filled life “demands uncompromising, radical loyalty to Jesus, a loyalty so powerful that it surpasses normal human relationships, even familial ones” (NET, n.71).

Stern points out that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 97a) also applies Micah 7:6 to Messianic times: “It has been taught: R. Nehorai said, ‘In the generation when Messiah comes, young men will insult the old, and old men will stand before the young [to give them honour]; daughters will rise up against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. The people will be dog-faced, and a son will not be abashed in his father’s presence.’”

Beale explains (p. 35):

A central theme in this passage is the coming hostility that the disciples would experience after Christ’s death and resurrection, reflected in part in the persecution described in Acts, the epistles, and Revelation. In this context, Jesus reminds his followers that he did not come to bring peace, in the sense of absence of external strife, in this life (10:34a) ... Quite the contrary, at times his ministry would create conflict, as people became polarised in their responses to his message and missionaries (10:34b) ... (p. 37) Jesus ... is using biblical language solemnly to underline his prediction of future opposition to his followers, even from among their own relatives ... If ... [some] in his audience recalled the next verse (Micah 7.7) he could have hoped that they would infer that the salvation that Micah waited for was now provided in Christ.

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There may also be an echo of Deuteronomy, where Levi says that he had no regard for his parents, he did not recognise his brothers, and he did not acknowledge his own children, but watched over God's word and guarded his covenant and taught it to Israel – as Jesus was commanding his disciples to do now in their generation (Deut 33:8-11).

Regarding carrying one's cross, NET notes this reflects the words of Plutarch: "According to Plutarch, 'Every criminal who is executed carries his own cross' (*De sera numinus vindicta* 9.554b). Jesus is speaking figuratively here in the context of rejection. If one's allegiance to Jesus does not have absolute priority, then one will not follow him in the face of possible rejection and persecution" (NET, n.72).

"The Greek word translated life can refer to both earthly, physical life and inner, transcendent life (one's 'soul'). In the context, if a person is not willing to suffer the world's rejection and persecution in order to follow Jesus but instead seeks to retain his physical life, then that person will lose both physical life and inner, transcendent life (at the judgment). On the other hand, the one who willingly gives up earthly, physical life to follow Jesus ('loses his life because of me') will ultimately find one's 'soul' (note that the parallel in John's Gospel speaks of 'guarding one's 'soul' for eternal life' (John 12:25))" (NET, n. 73).

Stern translates the Greek word *stavros* as *execution-stake* or just *stake* and the verb *crucify* as *execute on a stake*, *nail to the execution stake*, and *put to death on the stake*, to focus attention on the events themselves, particularly on the character as judgment. He makes a telling point that the usual terms explain less and carry church-related associations developed much later in history. "For centuries Jews were done to death under the sign of the cross by persons claiming to be followers of the Jewish Messiah. Therefore, to me, the cross symbolizes the persecution of Jews. As a Messianic Jew, still feeling the pain on behalf of my people, I do not have it in me to represent my New Testament faith by a cross ... If the term 'execution stake' or 'cross' speaks to us of what Yeshua, the eternal Word of God made flesh, did for us and for all humanity by his death, then the New Testament message is reaching our hearts" (Stern, note on v.38).

### **ACNA Readings**

**Introduction.** Bullying has become a severe problem among schoolchildren. The children who are bullied are traumatized, some even to the point of committing suicide. What perhaps goes unrecognized is the damage that the bullies do to themselves. They do not develop compassion, their ability to step into the shoes of another person is jeopardized. But when bullying is institutionalized and becomes the realm of adult behaviour, this is no longer called bullying, but persecution. Persecution is the theme of this day's Scripture readings.

**Common Theme.** Jeremiah 20:7-13 is Jeremiah's sixth lament, which might be called "Terror All Around." It is the cry of the victim of persecution. What is terrifying here is that the persecutor

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seems to be God. Psalm 69 uses the metaphor of drowning in deep waters, of sinking in mire, to describe how the persecuted person feels. In a somewhat gentler tone than Jeremiah, David begs God for relief and waits. Saint Paul – in an intricately reasoned passage near the end of Romans 5 – describes God's answer to Jeremiah and David; God's rescue involves more than our immediate needs, but that God's provision is for a total change from the consequences of Adam's fall, to the blessings of Jesus Christ and the free gift he offers. God has provided for the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness, in spite of what Jeremiah's and David's circumstances may imply. Matthew gives us Jesus' approach to persecution: have no fear. Terror is all around, enemies threaten, but keep on proclaiming the word of God. Jesus Christ has numbered the hairs of our head and the faithful person will be acknowledged before the Father who is in heaven.

**Jeremiah 20:7-13.** Numerous Bible translations record this reading as poetry including the Hebrew text (BHS). It is Jeremiah's sixth lament. In order to understand the significance of the poem, context is important. In chapter 19, the Lord tells Jeremiah to gather a group of priests and elders of the people in the Valley (*Gei*) of Hinnom, which gives us the English expression Gehenna – the place of torment. Another name for this area is *Tophet*, used in English – and Hebrew tradition – as a euphemism for *hell*. It was both a burial place and also the place where children were sacrificed to the idol Molech by burning.

In this place of routinized horror, God gives Jeremiah the message that Jerusalem will be horrifically destroyed. The place where they are standing will be called the Valley of Slaughter, people will eat their own children – presumably during a prolonged siege – Tophet will be filled with graves until there is no more room to bury, and the city will become ritually unclean (Jer 19:1-13). His message given, Jeremiah returns from Tophet and enters the House of the Lord. There he states that God will bring about all this disaster as prophesied because the people have refused to heed God's message. At this point, Jeremiah is arrested, beaten, and held overnight in a cell and released at the command of Pash-hur – chief officer of the House of the Lord. Jeremiah then prophesies that Pash-hur will die in exile. Then, Jeremiah's sixth lament begins.

He begins by accusing God of deceiving him and prevailing against him because God is stronger than he is. Because of God's message, Jeremiah is a laughingstock and generally reproached. He tries not to speak, but God's message is a fire that breaks out and he speaks. His close friends denounce him.

Strangely, Jeremiah – who has been crying out in anguish – now tells us that the Lord is with him through all this suffering. His persecutors will be shamed and will not succeed. The Lord of Hosts is described as testing the righteous. Jeremiah asks for revenge against his persecutors. He concludes with praise to the Lord, “for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers (Jeremiah 20:13).





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This argument is also suggested in 1 Corinthians 15:21. Saint Paul phrases it succinctly there: “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.” In verse 45, he rephrases the argument: “The first man Adam became a living being, the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.”

Through these parallel arguments, Saint Paul explains how God provides for people to be rescued from dire circumstances. In verse 44, he refers to the dead body as “what is sown” and describes it as perishable and sown in dishonour and weakness, to be raised in glory and power, no longer a natural body, but a spiritual one. This is the solution to our problem – including, I would add – our persecution of each other. For this, we thank and praise the one Man, Jesus Christ, whose obedience makes us righteous.

**Matthew 10: 16-33.** Context is very important for this short passage. In previous chapters, Jesus has been extremely busy, healing (Centurion's servant, 8:5-13), calling another disciple (Matt 9:9-13) raising the dead (Jairus' daughter, 9:23-25) and teaching. Faced with the needs of the people, Jesus comments on the need for labourers for the harvest. In the first part of chapter ten, Jesus is sending out his labourers – the twelve disciples – into the harvest.

In 10:5-15, Jesus gives the twelve disciples their instructions. They are to go only to Israel. Their function is to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. They are to take no money, but they are given the power to heal, to raise the dead, to heal lepers, to cast out demons, and either to bless receptive villages or to shake the dust of unwelcoming villages from their feet.

Now in today's reading, Jesus warns the disciples of the perils of their task. He uses metaphors to start with: the disciples are sent out as sheep among wolves. They need to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

They will be taken to court, flogged and dragged before governors and kings where the Holy Spirit will speak a witness through them. Families will be broken up betraying one another, brother versus brother to death, parents and their children, and children and their parents. Disciples will be hated because of Jesus' name. They are to flee from town to town, knowing that the Son of Man is coming.

The final word is that the disciples – and we as well – are to be like our Master. If our Master is called derogatory names, “how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt 10:25).

Finally, in spite of all that can be done against them, the disciples are told not to be afraid. Rather than fearing those who can persecute – killing the body – we are to fear the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell. The worth of the disciples is underscored by two metaphors. First, two sparrows are sold for a penny and yet not one of them falls to the ground “apart from your Father.” The disciples are of course worth far more than sparrows. As are we!

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The second metaphor is that the hairs on their heads are numbered. The hairs of the head are considered in the Old Testament as representing a very large number – as we have already seen in Psalm 69:4 – but our God has numbered our innumerable hairs because we are precious to him. The disciples are to acknowledge Jesus before people and Jesus will acknowledge them before “my Father who is in heaven.” To deny Jesus is to be denied by him before the Father, with the consequences that denial entails.

**Further reading.**

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