

Ps 103:1,2
Ps 146:3
Ps 34:6,7,8
Ps 32:2,5
Hy 49:1,2
Deuteronomy 30:11-20
Luke 4:16-21
LD 11.29

Yarrow, January 3, 2010

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

That Jesus is the Saviour is surely the heart of the Christian faith. Take away Jesus, and there is nothing left of the good news of the Bible.

But if that is so, brothers and sisters, then I have a question for you, and it's this: how does the fact that Jesus is Saviour benefit you *today*?

Please take a moment, congregation, and think about it. We faithfully confess that Jesus is Saviour, but tell me now how this fact helps you in the specific circumstances of your daily existence – whether the circumstances be questions of doubt, or struggles with the self, or tensions with the spouse, or conflict with the law, or strife with a creditor, or battles with ill health, etc, etc? *How does the fact that Jesus is Saviour benefit you **today**?*

Almost automatically we answer the question in terms of the last day. Then we say to ourselves in the midst of the strife of this mortal life that we have comfort in this that one day all the trials and suffering will end, because when we die we shall go to be with the Lord. Jesus is Saviour and so we won't ever have to go to hell..., Jesus is Saviour and so one day the tears and the crying and the pain will be taken away....

I put it to you this afternoon, congregation, that that answer is much too shallow. I grant: it's comforting to know today that in time to come I shall be spared the anguish of hell, comforting too to know that all tension and tears will be taken away. But let's be honest: my struggles with ill health, with contrary children, with financial pressures are very real *today*, and the thought of going to be with the Lord in years to come does not really take the pressures off my struggles today. Must I conclude, then, that the Christian faith is relevant and comforting only with a view to eternity, is not really all that practical and helpful for *today's* troubles?

This is the subject addressed in Lord's Day 11.29 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Here the church acknowledges that the gospel God prepared for us touches *today* in a very concrete and happy manner. For it is because of Jesus' work as Saviour that the curse of God is taken out of the trials we daily face.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

JESUS THE SAVIOUR REMOVES THE CURSE OF GOD FROM DAILY TRIALS.

1. Daily life tastes God's curse
2. Daily life tastes Jesus' deliverance
3. Daily life tests my responsibility.

1. Daily life tastes God's curse

The name 'Jesus', says our LD, means 'Saviour'. More precisely, the term means "Yahweh saves". Yahweh, of course, is the sovereign Creator who has established a bond of love with sinners – including you and me. What does this covenant God save from? The angel told Joseph to give the baby the name 'Jesus' because, he said, "He shall save His people from their sins." That's it: Jesus saves His people from their sins.

Why, congregation, do we need to be saved from our sins? In what way are our sins a problem for us?

With LD 10 we noted that it is God Who keeps this world existing. He upholds this world so that it does not collapse into the nothingness it was before God created it. More, He causes development, change, growth in the world He made so that things today are not exactly the way things were yesterday. All of that, we learned with LD 10, is to say that God is not far away from this world; instead, God is close by, God is present here, is beside us in every step we take.

But this God is not just beside us in the sense that He upholds and governs all. This God also evaluates what we do, makes a judgment on our actions, and *responds*. For God once created us to be responsible, and God today treats us according to the responsibility He placed upon us in the beginning.

How God reacts to our actions? He hates all sin, punishes iniquity with His just judgment. He sees every deed we do, He hears every word we speak, He discerns every thought we think, evaluates it all according to the standard of His holiness, and in turn acts towards us according to His righteous evaluation.

Let me illustrate. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat of every tree of the Garden, except that one in the middle. God added, "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). God would observe Adam's and Eve's every move, would surely notice if they ate of that tree, would evaluate that act as disobedience, and respond with a death sentence. Adam and Eve lived in the presence of holy and sovereign God, and so could never get away from His just judgment.

Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. God responded as He had said He would. So Adam and Eve learned from experience that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Immediately they died spiritually; their bond with God was broken, they became slaves of sin, dead in sin.

Yet they did not immediately die physically. Adam lived another 930 years. That's not to say, though, that death did not enter into his life. We all know that, normally spoken, the move from 'alive' to 'dead' involves a process. Along that road of being fully alive, healthy, vibrant on the one hand to being dead, a corpse, on the other, one meets various degrees of sickness, one meets hunger, stress, aging, weakness, etc. There was no death in Paradise, and so Adam and Eve never had to contend with sickness, with hunger, with stress, with weakness, etc. But once sin entered the world, death entered too, and with death came everything that moves a person from being fully alive and healthy to being fully dead. Sickness, hunger, stress, death itself: *it is God's judgment on the fall into sin*, it is God's judgment *on sin itself*.

The Lord God spelled that out for Israel in most graphic language in the covenant He made with Israel at Mt Sinai. He said in Leviticus 26 that

"If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land" (vss 3ff).

Notice the direct connection God established between obedience on the one hand and blessing on the other. God would *respond* to obedience with His blessing. Then God continued:

“But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant, I also will do this to you: I will even appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you” (vss 14ff).

Again: notice the direct connection God established between disobedience and curse. God is beside His people, present with them, He observes what they do, evaluates, and *responds*. Says God: sickness and meagre crop, war and stress are a direct result of *sin*. The Lord repeats the point in so many words in the passage we read from Deuteronomy 30: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil” (vs 15). God deals with sinners according to the responsibility with which He created us.

So, in the days of the Judges, when the people of Israel chose to disregard God’s commands and worship Him in a self-styled manner or worship the idols also, God responded in a predictable fashion. It’s a refrain throughout the book: God sold them into the hands of their enemies. The result was war, was oppression, was hunger, and hence weakness, sickness, death.

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul makes the same connection between sin and sickness. I Corinthians 11: “Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (vss 27ff). Those words are well-known to us. But listen to the apostle’s very next words: “*For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep*” (vs 31). You see: Paul lays a connection between the sicknesses and deaths in the congregation of Corinth on the one hand and their hum-ho manner of celebrating the Lord’s Supper on the other. That’s to say: God sees what the Corinthian believers are doing, evaluates it, and responds according to the pattern He foretold. He punishes sin with His judgment – in this instance sickness.

And what shall we say of the book of Revelation? The book mentions numerous plagues, and all are God’s curse on His disobedient people. You see, in the New Testament dispensation Paul’s words to the Romans remain so true: “the wages of sin is death” – and death includes all the sicknesses and wars and disaster that brings one from vibrant health to being dead.

With this perspective in mind, we do well to look at the events of our own lives as well as the events of our world today. In the congregation of Yarrow are persons contending with illness, be it cancer or handicap or arthritis, etc. There are persons too battling with strained marriages, battling with having to raise the children alone. There are persons who would love to receive children and don’t, others for whom the thought of more children gives nightmares. There are those too involved with legal proceeding, business unpleasantness, crisis with employees, etc, etc. Given the connection that God has laid between human sin and God’s judgment, are we not to conclude that God’s judgment rests on us and our loved ones? Surely, congregation, on the basis of the texts we mentioned from Scripture, we can come to no other conclusion! Yet that thought is most terrifying, for the apostle says that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).... And what shall we say of the war in Afghanistan, of the unrest in Iran, of the recent attempt to down that aircraft approaching Detroit, of the snowstorms in the eastern

states...? No, congregation, God is not far off; He sees our every deed, hears our every word, discerns our every thought, evaluates according to the standard of His holy law, and *responds*....

Now I ask you again the question I asked earlier: how does the fact that Jesus is Saviour benefit you *today*? It's obvious: we need deliverance so very much! That's our second point:

2. Daily life tastes Jesus' deliverance

We need deliverance from our sins. To be more precise, we need deliverance from the just judgment of God that our sins attract. Here is the role of the Saviour. *Today* Jesus saves, that is, *today* He saves His people from their sins. Precisely *how* Jesus does that we'll discuss with LD 13. Suffice it for now to say that Jesus takes our sins *away*. The result is that these sins are *gone*. What, then, does Holy God see when He looks at you and me? Does He see sinners performing sin, so that He is prompted to respond with His judgments? This is what it means, congregation, that Jesus is Saviour: God in heaven does *not* see me as a *sinner*, does not see in me a person guilty of this sin and that sin and that. Since Jesus has taken my sins away, God in heaven sees in me instead a person who is righteous for Jesus' sake.

But, congregation, if God does not see you and me as sinners, as guilty of this wrong deed and that hurtful word and that sinful thought, if God in heaven instead sees you and me as "not guilty", tell me, *will He still pour wrath on us??* If Jesus has taken my sin away, if God for Jesus' sake no longer sees me as guilty of sin, will He then respond to my sins with His judgments? The answer is this: God in heaven does not see me as a sinner, more, God in heaven does not see my sins because Jesus has taken those sins away. *So God will not respond to my sins with His judgments!* Jesus is my Saviour, He delivers me from my sins, so my sins are gone, so God in turn *will not pour His curse out on me any more*; instead, He'll pour out His blessing! Because of Jesus' work on my behalf, God in heaven sees me not as an object of His wrath, but instead as an object of His mercy! Instead of cursing me, this God promises to *love*, to adopt me as His child, to be my Father. And as Father He promises –it's part and parcel of the covenant He made with me– He "promises to provide [me] with all good and avert all evil or turn it to [my] benefit." See there what it means that Jesus is Saviour!! It's a gospel that cannot touch the here and now in a more direct manner possible!

Sure, then things still happen to me that I consider are bad. Sickness, accident, strife, disappointment: they all remain part of this broken life. But this is the gospel: *in my strife and sicknesses and trials I need not think that God is cursing me!* Trials are for the child of God *not* evidence that God is angry with us. Jesus delivers His people from their sins, has taken away the cause of our eternal hunger and misery, has reconciled us instead to God, and so there's only grace, abundant grace for those washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in Rom 8: "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (vs 1).

The phrase "No condemnation" refers not just to the pronouncement which the righteous Judge will utter on the last day; it refers also to the way in which God looks at His own today; that's the force of the term 'now'; "there is ... *now* no condemnation". And surely, if "there is ... now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus," then we need not fear God's judgment in our lives, need not think in the midst of tribulation that 'God must be angry, quite angry with me; I must have done something awfully wrong.'

Yet it's fact that sicknesses befall us, and so do financial rip offs and marital tensions and exhaustion and hailstorms and so on; it is fact that such trials are part and parcel of this life. But these calamities are not evidence of divine anger; instead, as we heard last time with LD 10, a wise Father in heaven wants to bring us from where we are to a goal He has determined for us (we are

to share His holiness) and He in wisdom determines that to accomplish that purpose it is right and profitable to take us along a particularly difficult track. And while we're on that difficult track, this God who made Himself our Father for Jesus' sake has us fully in His protective hand. *That's* why we can be patient in adversity; for Jesus' sake my sin is taken away, God is not angry with me, He is instead my Father, busy in my life for my good.

Allow me now to give specific colour to all I've said by referring to Luke 4. Jesus was asked to preach in the synagogue of Nazareth and chose as His text some verses from Isaiah 61:

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lu 4:18).

In the synagogue of Nazareth on that Sabbath were persons who tasted the hardships and questions of life as truly as we do. There were people in Nazareth battling with the hardships of poverty – and Jesus recites Scripture for them to the effect that there is gospel for the poor. There may well have been a young widow in the synagogue – and Jesus reads in her hearing something about healing the brokenhearted. For all I know there were persons present who had a family member locked up in the local prison – and Jesus reads something about "liberty to the captives." And maybe there was a blind man amongst the audience – and Jesus reads something about "recovery of sight to the blind." We can imagine the question on the minds of the widow, of the poor, of the blind: what's this got to do with me? How does this touch *me* in the grind of my life?

See, Jesus closes the book, begins His sermon. His theme? Vs 21: "today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." *Today fulfilled*: does that mean that the brokenhearted widow is healed of her brokenheartedness, that the captives in jail receive the promised liberty, that the blind can see? We know better; the widow didn't find her husband home after the service, the doors of prison did not swing open, the blind did not receive his sight. What then did Jesus mean with the theme of His sermon? "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" – were these just empty words? Not at all, congregation. Jesus meant this: the *curse of God* that receives expression in poverty, in death, in imprisonment, in blindness – that *curse* is gone. For here is *Jesus*, Saviour, and He's going to *take away the sins of His people*, and the result can only be that there's no room any more for the wrath of God. But if the wrath is gone, *then I'm always safe in His hands no matter where or how He in wisdom leads me!* Then poverty is *not* God's curse on my sin, and burying a family member is *not* a display of God's anger on my transgression, and imprisonment is *not* a punishment for insidious evil, and blindness is *not* a just reward on iniquity. See there the wealth of Jesus' words: the *sting* of death is gone, the *bite* of adversity taken away. For Jesus *takes away my sin*, and so "there is ... now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

What blessed gospel, beloved, for the people of Nazareth as they sought to cope with the brokenness of this life! To have to go through life as a widow with the thought in mind that 'I'm a widow because God is angry with me' – that's hard! To have to sit in prison year in year out with the thought in mind that prison is an ongoing expression of God's wrath on my sin – that's comfortless. But to know in life and death, in prison and in freedom, in health and sickness that Jesus is my Saviour, that He has taken my sin away so that there is no condemnation for me *today* any more, that God is not angry with me on account of my sins – look, that gives relief! Then widowhood isn't pleasant, true, and being locked away isn't either, and neither is living with blindness or poverty, but what peace flows from the realisation that God in heaven is not angry

with me, that instead He is my faithful Father who wisely leads my life along paths that He determines are best for my salvation and His glory.

Here, my brothers and sisters, is gospel for us in the midst of the pains and tribulations that characterize our daily living. Am I up against God's wrath when things go wrong? No, No, No! That's my only comfort in life and death; "I belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" who "has fully paid for all my sins," and now "preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation" (LD 1). Truly, that's comfort, that gives perspective!!

3. Daily life tests my faith

To the wealth of this gospel, brothers and sisters, I need to add a warning. The people of Israel at the time of the Judges tasted the displeasure of God on their sins, as did too the saints of Corinth when they celebrated the Lord's supper. Notice: the Israelites were *God's people* just as you and I are. And the saints of Corinth were *saints*, God's redeemed people too. So: it is possible for God's people to experience the heavy hand of God, to taste the wrath of God in this life. How it's possible?

We said already: God's wrath comes upon people when there's sin. When Jesus takes that sin away, there is no wrath any more; there is only blessing. Now the question is: when does Jesus take sin away? In other words: who benefit from Jesus' redeeming work? Here we're back to the material of Lord's Day 7. Only those persons who are grafted into Christ by faith and accept all His benefits actually receive the removal of sin for Jesus' sake. So we're confronted with the question whether I *believe* what the Lord has told me about Jesus' work. That is: do I *accept* the promise God gave me in Jesus? Do I accept –and I'm not to do it once only but *day by day* as my circumstances change and I commit more sin– do I *embrace* time and again the promise God has given at my baptism to wash my sins away for Jesus' sake? And embracing God's gracious promise of forgiveness of sins and being righteous for Jesus' sake *looks like something*; it involves *repentance* from sin, sorrow for sin, fighting against sin. Where faith in Jesus Christ is not present, where there isn't sorrow for sin, I may –yes, must– expect God's anger in my life. Remember: the Lord God continues to deal with us *according to the responsibility with which He created us*. This is the demand of a passage as Deuteronomy 30.

That is why, brothers and sisters, the trials of this life are ongoing cause for self-examination. Do you, in the face of the sins you've committed, still believe that Jesus is *your* Saviour? Are you, in the face of what you've done, *sorry* for your transgressions, repentant? Where the answer is No, you have work to do; you need to repent of your specific sins, fight them in the strength of the Lord – lest you bring upon yourself and your loved ones more wrath from God. Make no mistake, beloved: your God is a "consuming fire" (Heb 12:29), and His wrath will plague the unrepentant both in this life and in the life to come. Then the trials of this life are a small foretaste of the eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth to come.

But where there is sorrow for sin, where there is a clinging to the promises of God to wash sin away in Jesus' blood, *there* there is no wrath, no condemnation, no judgment from God; where there is repentance there is only grace, God's favour every day. Then the trials of this life are not expressions of God's anger; they are rather the care of a loving and wise Father who wants His child increasingly to grow in Him, to share His holiness. And the peace that perspective gives today is a small foretaste of the eternal joy God has prepared through Jesus' work.

On the day of Christ's return there shall be no more crying or weeping any more, for Jesus is Saviour. *Today*, in the midst of life's brokenness, *the child of God may enjoy the beginning of this blessing!* That is the gospel of Jesus as the Saviour.