

Ps 93:1,2
Hy 1B
Ps 8:1,2,3,4,5
Ps 144:2
Ps 21:1,4; Hy 5:2
Genesis 1:24-31
Psalm 8
Lord's Day 3

Yarrow, October 11, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The conclusion of Lord's Day 2 had not been flattering; we were, we confessed, "inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour." The obvious next question is, of course, where this hatred came from. That's the material of Lord's Day 3, as formulated in Question 6: "Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?"

It's an interesting question because its very formulation catches typical human thinking. I mean this: it's in us to look for explanations for why we do what we do, and if the conduct is negative our default habit is to look for the explanation outside of ourselves. It's called blame shifting, something we and our children get very good at doing. "It's Johnny's fault," or "It's the way I was raised," or "It's because of the time of the month," or ... and we have no difficulty to come with a list as long as one's arm to show that my conduct was *just not my fault*....

But the Creator of heaven and earth –and He's also the ultimate Judge– leaves us no room for blame shifting. Why don't we love the way we're supposed to? The Lord God is adamant: it's because of your own disobedience in the beginning. And He adds: yet you are My people! So great is His mercy to the undeserving!

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE LORD GOD HAS MERCY ON THE BLAMEWORTHY.

1. Our guilt before God,
2. God's mercy in Jesus Christ.

1. Our guilt before God

I mentioned: we prefer to shift the blame. There is no one on earth today who denies that life knows brokenness, suffering, lack of love, evil. But seldom will you meet people who dare to take personal responsibility for all the troubles of their own lives. An evolutionist will insist that evil exists in this world because evolution hasn't yet perfected things. Give it time, the evolutionist will say, and Mother Nature will weed out the weakness we know as evil. In terms, then, of personal responsibility for an inclination to hate the other, the evolutionist will insist: it's not your fault; it's just the way of Mother Nature on the road to fuller development.

Other religions (for Evolutionism is certainly a religion) offer other explanations. Islam insists that man is born in a state of purity, but in the course of youth external influences bear upon a person to make him do evil things. That makes it clear: the fault for evil in your life is not your own but the

environment around you.¹ The Hindu will tell you that it's karma, that the way you are and the circumstances of your life are totally outside your control because you're getting the just reward of the behaviour of an earlier you in a previous existence. Nothing you can do about that...

The Christian, however, speaks differently. He has learned what Scripture says, and that is that evil exists in this world (and so I hate God and neighbour alike) as a result of the fall into sin. That's Genesis 3; end of story.

In point of fact, though, it's not end of story. For our natural bent to pass the buck raises questions in our minds about our personal responsibility in the fall. Thoughts arise like: the fall is actually God's fault because He planned it, or if God had made us better we wouldn't have collapsed before Satan's temptation. Or: the fall (and our resulting sinfulness) is actually Satan's fault because he tempted us, he tripped us up. If he hadn't been so mean and cunning.... Or: the fall is actually Adam and Eve's fault. Then we may accept that we have to live with the consequences of their disobedience, but our conscience doesn't bother us; the lack of love in our homes isn't our fault but that's just human nature – and that's Adam's fault....

But the Catechism asks, brothers and sisters, what you need to know in order to enjoy to the full the wonderful comfort of Lord's Day 1, and the answer includes that I need to know "first, how great my sins and misery are." And part of coming to grips with how great my sins and misery are is the material of Lord's Day 3, a Lord's Day that allows for no blame shifting in any way. The point is this: as long as you shift the blame for your personal pain away from yourself, you'll not enjoy the comfort of Lord's Day 1 to the full. What we need to do this afternoon, then, is clear our minds of the deception that the fall (and its resulting evil) is somehow God's fault or Satan's fault or Adam & Eve's fault, and therefore not ours. Stronger, we need to accept in faith that the responsibility *is ours*. Why, then, must we say that it's not God's fault, not Satan's, not Adam & Eve's fault either, but is instead fully our own?

a. Not God

The Lord reveals Himself as a God who knows no evil in Himself. He is perfect, free of defect in any way. More, He is almighty, and so able to make something that's perfect, free of any defect.

He tells us that in the span of six days He fashioned a world out of nothing. The climax of His creating work took place on the 6th day with His creation of mankind, and then His own evaluation of His handiwork; "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). The Hebrew actually pauses to ask the reader to sit up and take note of God's evaluation, for the text literally says, "Behold!" And that's to say: listen carefully, note this: "it is very good." Elsewhere the Scriptures relate what happened in heaven when God put the earth together, for God tells Job that the angels burst into songs of joy and praise on account of the excellent work of the Creator (Job 38:7). In fact, when John is allowed to look into heaven he sees 24 elders fall before the throne of the Almighty and then hears them sing this song: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Revelation 4:10f). It's clear to us: neither the angels of heaven nor the elders who used to live on earth would sing as they do about the Creator's handiwork if it were someone marred by defect.

It's a point I need to press. We know that many in North America maintain that the world got here through a process of evolution. Some of these believers in evolution are Christians, and then the

¹ See Geisler & Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pg 43.

point is that they believe God created the world through the process of evolution. This variety of evolution is known as 'theistic evolution'. Theistic Evolution believes that the days of Genesis 1 are not normal days as we know them, but are instead long periods of time, periods in which God slowly (through evolution) formed fish to be what they are, formed birds and trees and dogs to be what they are – and slowly formed man to be what he is too.

This theory is actually an effort to blend the findings of science with the revelation of God in Scripture, and obviously there are problems with such a theory. I can mention that God's choice of the word 'day' in Genesis 1 was not a mistake; if He had meant long periods of time, He would have used a word that conveyed that notion, for God is a God of truth. I can also mention the fact that the thought of God creating through a process over a long period of time does not capture the notion of His almighty power nearly so well as His calling something into existence instantly. But most importantly – and I raise this in relation to the material of our Lord's Day– the concept of theistic evolution has within it place for trial and error, with the weaker dying out and the stronger getting better. In this picture, people have existed on earth for millions of years in various stages of human development. These people had to kill to eat, more, these people died in the course of time. But where did death come from? The Theistic Evolutionist has to say that death is somehow natural. But so, then, is the grief that comes with death, and the sickness that leads to death. You see where this is going, congregation: theistic evolution explains the reality of evil in this world –including sin– as a natural phenomenon. Yet all evolution is led by God – and so God is ultimately the cause of the evil present in this life.

That picture is simply not what one reads in the Bible. The Lord God tells us that on the sixth day of creation He determined within Himself to create man. It's Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" That in turn is what God did. Though He called the stars and the grass and the frogs and dogs into existence by a word of command ("Let there be," He decreed), with man He physically collected dust from the ground, formed it into the shape of a man, and blew into His nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Later on the sixth day He took a rib from the man He'd made and fashioned a woman from the rib (Genesis 2:21f). He created man differently than He created horses and monkeys because man was unique; this creature alone was created in His image.

The notion of 'image of God' does not mean that the man and woman God created looked like God. The notion catches instead the concept that Adam and Eve (and in them the whole human race) reflected the way God *acted*. After God finished creating the world He did not remain on this earth, and so He left an ambassador on earth who could show to all creatures (be it angels or animals or plants or insects) what God was like. Specifically, through the way mankind was to "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground," these fish and birds and animals and reptiles could receive an accurate understanding of God's love, God's mercy, God's justice, etc, for the world He made.

We understand: the position God gave to man as His image on earth was an exceedingly honoured position. This is David's point in Ps 8. He stands outside one night and lifts his head to gaze up at the moon and the stars, and he's overwhelmed by what he sees. Compared to the majesty of the heavens, he feels so small.... That reality presses out of him the question of vs 4: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" Beside the vast expanse of the heavens, little six foot man is *little*, a speck! Yet, says David as he thinks back to God's revelation in Genesis 1 about God making man in His image: "You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour" (vs 5). "Heavenly beings," says our translation, but the footnote

gives us the better reading; the Hebrew has here the word 'God'. This is Genesis 1; God created mankind to rule over all His handiwork, and do it in a way that images what God is like. What honour, what privilege! On a scale of 1 to 10, with God at 10, God gave the human race, man and woman alike, a position at 9 – a “little lower than God”! Can you fathom, beloved, the honour of that!

This, we understand, is the glorious confession of Lord's Day 3: “God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.” That’s not language that points a finger at God as if He somehow did a shoddy job in making us – as if the evil within us is part of His creating work. As Calvin would say, it’s impious to think in those terms.

But, I hear you say, that doesn’t answer the charge that God *planned* the fall, and so the fall and our resulting depravity is still His responsibility.

It is true: all things that happen in God’s world occur because He has ordained it. He, after all, is 100% sovereign over all; He’s the almighty. But there’s more to be said. For when the Lord God created man to image Him and so gave him such a high ranking amongst His other creatures, the Lord took seriously the numerous gifts He’d given to man. One of those gifts was the ability to *act responsibly*. So God could tell man not to eat from that particular tree of the Garden, and man had it in him to obey that command with ease. God told man to care for the garden (and do it as God would do it), and man had it in him to obey that command with ease. Then Yes, God is 100% sovereign over all that He’s made. But man is at the same time 100% responsible for all he does. How those two square up is more than my finite mind can understand, and that’s fine because no creature –however exalted his position in creation may be– shall ever understand the mind of the sovereign Creator. The long and short of it is this: never can I pass responsibility for my fall into sin back to God, on the grounds that the fall was part of His plan. Instead, I need to take seriously the exalted position God entrusted to the human race, and recognize the responsibility that comes with that.

b. Satan

If, then, we cannot blame God for our fall into sin, can we blame Satan? Is it not so that if he hadn’t deceptively appeared in the Garden in the form of a snake, Eve wouldn’t have fallen for him? And he was so cunning too in what he said....

There is no doubt, congregation, that Satan’s words through the mouth of the serpent were cunning. But the fact of the matter is that Eve –and Adam too– were not to take advice from any creature just on the creature’s say so – for the very simple reason that God had made the human race to be rulers over the creatures. On a scale of 1 to 10, mankind received a position of 9 – while the frogs and the goldfish and the snakes also received a position of 1. That, too, is David’s conclusion in Ps 8 as he digests God’s revelation in Genesis 1. Vs 6: “You made him ruler over the works of Your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beast of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea...” – and that obviously includes the snake now speaking to Eve about becoming “like God, knowing good and evil” if you eat of that tree. If a child in kindergarten suggests to a teenager that his throwing a stone through the school window will win that teenager the principle’s favour and the teenager then throws the stone, will the principle accept the teenager’s plea that it’s all the kindergarten kid’s fault? We understand it: the teenager can never blame the kindergarten student, simply because of the teenager’s greater maturity and responsibility. So it is too in relation to blaming Satan. Our exalted position as image of God means we can never shift the blame for our fall to Satan, nor to the serpent Satan had possessed. The Catechism catches this notion in Lord's Day 4.9, with these

words: "God so created man that he was able to [obey]. But man, at the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience, robbed himself ... of these gifts." Yes, the whole thing was *instigated* by the devil; it was Satan who first raised the possibility of disobeying God. But the responsibility is ours, and that's caught in the phrase "in deliberate disobedience".

c. Adam & Eve

That leaves yet our inclination to blame Adam and Eve. We think in terms of: we weren't in Paradise, we didn't eat from the forbidden fruit, and so the fall isn't really our responsibility. Then yes, we accept that we have to live with the consequences of Adam's disobedience, but we feel that we don't have to take responsibility for ending up living in a fallen and sin-filled world.

The argument of Scripture, congregation, goes the other way. If baby Cain in fact was not responsible for his own sinfulness, why did the Lord God not restore him to Paradise? If the child born the day before the flood started was not responsible for any sin yet (for would you argue that a child a day old has already sinned?), would God not be most unjust to have the child drown in the flood? Is that the kind of God you have?! I can ask the same of the child in Sodom and Gomorrah who was about to be born before God rained fire and brimstone from heaven on those cities and killed the mother and the child alike. If that child was innocent of sin before God, is God right to destroy the child with the city? Is that the kind of God you have?!

It turns out, congregation, that God taught Israel that every child is already guilty of sin at birth. That's the lesson of Leviticus 12, that chapter where the Lord commanded parents after childbirth to bring a sin offering to the temple on account of the child they'd borne. The point is that this newborn is a sinner – not just in the sense that this newborn will one day, when he (or she) is older, commit transgression against God, but specifically in the sense that this newborn is already guilty before God. How is this child guilty? This child is guilty *in Adam and Eve*. That's why Paul can tell the Romans not only that "sin entered the world through one man" (and that's of course a reference to Adam in Genesis 3), but also that "all sinned" – and there his reference is to the fact that the whole human race (in a way I don't understand) sinned with Adam and Eve in Paradise (Romans 5:12). In fact, Paul uses the same argument to show that sinners are redeemed through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, for –says Paul– "we died with Christ" (Romans 6:8) and his point is that somehow (in a way I don't understand) Christ was not the only one who died on the cross and was buried and arose; somehow I also, with all the saints, was present on Calvary and died with Christ, was buried on Good Friday and arose on Easter Sunday. If that argument will hold for me in relation to redemption, it shall need to hold for me also in relation to the fall. I simply can't blame Adam & Eve for the evils of life as if the fall into sin is their fault and not mine in any way. Instead, I am responsible for my own sinfulness and so for the evils I commit as well as for the evils that happen to me.

d. Consequence

There is, brothers and sisters, a consequence that flows from all this. It's in us to try to shift the blame for our troubles away from ourselves, and point the finger at another. We do it readily in daily life, and get very good at it. And no doubt: others contribute to our tribulations. But the fact of the matter is that we encounter the troubles we have *because we no longer live in Paradise*. And here's the thing: that I'm no longer in Paradise is not, says the Lord God, God's fault, and it's not Satan's fault, and it's not even Adam & Eve's fault, but ultimately, says God, my exile from Paradise *is my fault*. Before

God *I first of all* am responsible for the brokenness of my life, for the tension of my home, for the evils I experience – be it in giving or receiving. It will not do before God to shift the blame to another.

And yes, that observation has consequences. We are humans, not goldfish. God created us to a lofty position –9 on a scale of 1 to 10– and that position comes with distinct responsibility. We need to *take responsibility* –all of us together and each of us individually– for falling of that exalted ladder, and we need to *take responsibility* for the bitter results of that fall as we experience them daily. In the light of Genesis 1 it is below the dignity of being human to blame everyone else for our troubles. We need to be *men*, we need to be *women*, we need to be truly *human* again, and not act as if we are no more responsible for our circumstances than goldfish.

But taking responsibility for our broken circumstances, brothers and sisters, also looks like something. It implies that we give up pointing fingers, blaming our upbringing, blaming the poor night's sleep, blaming the time of the month, blaming the others in the office, blaming the pressure of home, of work, etc – and in the process feeling sorry for ourselves. Instead, we shall adopt a posture of *humility*, recognizing that the troubles I encounter have come upon me as the just consequences of my own fall into sin in the beginning. And that attitude will drive us to seek the only redemption there is from the troubles of life, and that's in Jesus Christ. It's our other point:

2. God's Mercy in Jesus Christ.

The person who makes the confession of Lord's Day 3 is the same person who earlier made the confession of Lord's Day 1, namely, that "I belong, with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." I belong to Him because "He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil."

There's now the question. Why did the Lord Jesus Christ set me free from Satan's power and make me His? Might the coming of Jesus Christ into this world somehow be an expression of regret from God's side for the predicament into which He somehow let us come? Make no mistake, congregation: God did not send His Son to redeem us because He was somehow sorry that He let the fall into sin happen, or because He was sorry that Satan got the better of us, or because He recognizes that we were not present in Paradise and so are suffering because of someone else's mistake. In no way are there apologies from God for our troubles!

But why, then, did He send His Son? Why, congregation, simply and only out of His great mercy to those who do not deserve it! See here your God: He redeems the blameworthy! And that is grace: to have mercy on those who put themselves in a bind! How wonderful this God!

There's more here. What has this Christ done to redeem you? He, brothers and sisters, was a *man*, and acted the part of the *man*. That's to say: He recognized that God had given Him an exalted position as ruler over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth – and that includes that He was both master over Himself as well as master over the devil who tripped Eve up in the Garden in the beginning. On the cross of Calvary He engaged the devil in combat, and defeated Him, bound Him – and so was elevated by God to the throne of the universe.

There's more still. For when Christ died and arose from the grave, we died and arose with Him – even as we had sinned in Adam. More, when God exalted Christ to the right hand of God as Lord over His creation, He "raise us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus," says Paul to the Ephesians (2:6). Imagine that: you and I in principle restored to that place of 9 in the scale of 1 to 10!! What honour, what privilege!!

But if we're restored in principle to such a place, I need again to acknowledge the responsibility that comes with such a high office! That means first of all that I cease passing the buck to shift the

blame of difficulties to others, but I'll acknowledge before God *my* sins and the sins of those over whom God has given me responsibility. In the strength of the Holy Spirit I'll act as a *man* again, once created – and now re-created– in the image of God. Instead of being a wimp, I'll *take charge* under God of my life, my home, my work, my self.

You feel it's all too much? This, beloved, is where Lord's Day 3 stands on the shoulders of Lord's Day 1. For Lord's Day 1 had confessed this wonderful promise of God: "by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life, and *makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.*" How else shall the creature fashioned to image God "live for Him" than by *being* image of God??

Our lives know so many troubles, so much brokenness. I have learned from Scripture where this brokenness comes from, and so I'll confess, with humility, my own contribution to the pain and trouble of my life. Instead, then, of pointing a finger at another, I'll confess in humiliation that I deserve God's righteous judgment on my disobedience in Paradise. Then I'll marvel, in unbounded jubilation, that the God I rejected in Paradise has again made me His own – out of mere grace alone.

What a God this is!!