

Ps 75:6  
Hy 1A  
Ps 62:1,2,3  
Ps 40:4  
Hy 53:1,2  
Hebrews 10:35-11:10  
Ps 40  
Lord's Day 7

Yarrow, November 22, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 7 asks a question that spins through the minds of each of us from time to time. It's nice to say with Lord's Day 6.18 that God has given a Mediator in Jesus Christ, and nice to add with Lord's Day 6.19 that God Himself has revealed this delightful information, but *is everybody then going to be saved through Christ?* If the answer is Yes, then I'm obviously included too, and I can be sure I'll be in heaven. But if the answer is No, if the answer is that not everybody will be saved, then I've got to confront that thorny question: *what about me? How do I know whether or not Christ died for me, whether or not I'll be saved?*

The Bible is emphatic that, congregation, that not all will be saved. The Bible is also emphatic that to be saved one must *believe*. I think of the passage we read from Hebrews 11: "And without faith it is impossible to please God" (vs 6). I think too of Jesus' words, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). So the Catechism in Lord's Day 7 says that only those will be saved who have faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith. It's something we hear about regularly. What, though, is faith? Why do I actually need faith? For that matter, how do I know whether I have faith?

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

## YOU NEED FAITH TO BE SAVED.

1. What is faith?
2. Why is faith needed?
3. How do I know whether I have faith?

### ***1. What is faith?***

We use the term 'faith' rather loosely in our culture. We say we have faith in the government, and that's to say that we're confident the government will govern well. We say we believe the Canucks will win the next game, and we mean that we're optimistic about the Canucks' chances. The word 'faith' and the word 'believe' are part of our daily language.

Yet we all realize that somehow that sort of usage of the term 'faith' and the term 'believe' does not do full justice to what the Bible means with those words. When the Bible insists that we need faith to be saved, the Bible is not saying that faith in the government or in the Canucks' ability to win will actually ensure that we shall be eternally saved from the damnation of hell. For the faith of the Bible has its own content and so has its own colour.

The faith one needs in order to be saved is faith in God. What, then, does faith believe about God? We could answer that this God is the Almighty, is the Creator of all things, is the One who upholds heaven and earth today. Though that's certainly true, that simply does not catch what faith is all about.

For it helps me nothing to know that God is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth; even the demons believe that! Rather, the Lord has shown us in His Word that He is a God who *relates* to us, has a *relationship* with us. *Faith embraces that relationship*. I need to expand.

To make a relation possible with the creature man, the Lord God gave to man an ability He did not give to rocks and goldfish and cats and trees. For God gave to man the wherewithal to *act responsibly*. Man has *responsibility* for his conduct.

There's the question, then, in connection with the topic at hand: how shall man respond to *the relationship God established with him*? When God told Adam he could eat from every tree of the Garden except that one over yonder, how was Adam to respond? We realize: he was to *accept* what the Lord said.

Were there other possibilities? Yes, there were. Adam could reject what God told him, could reject the relation God established with him too – something the rocks of the earth and the fish of the sea could not do.

As it turned out, Adam did reject God's covenant with him, refused to respond with humbly accepting God's bond of love. That was his sin – and in him our sin.

The Lord God in His great mercy did not respond to man's disobedience by terminating the relation He had established with mankind. Instead, He affirmed His relation of love with the creature man, for He sought out Adam and Eve and told them of the gospel of redemption He would provide. The Seed of the woman, He said, would crush the seed of the serpent. In the words of Lord's Day 6: God in mercy would supply a Mediator in the person of His only Son, Jesus Christ. That, in the fullness of time, is what God did.

But: though God gave His Son for sin, God did not immediately take particular saved sinners off this planet and bring them to heaven. Instead, He keeps life going on Earth, keeps relating to people in Christ. He tells people He is their Father and they His children, tells people that He gave His Son for their sin so that sinners might be reconciled to Him, tells people too that He gives His Holy Spirit to indwell sinners and renew them. Why does He do that? Why tell them much but delay giving the fullness of life eternal? That, brothers and sisters, is because the Lord God continues to treat us as *responsible*. In His covenant of love with sinners, He continues to give His promises and tell us His demands, *and He wants us to respond responsibly to those promises and demands*. After the fall into sin we have not become sticks and stones, have not become cats or rats either. We remain *people*, and therefore *responsible before God* to respond to His relation-with-us in a fashion agreeable to His identity as sovereign God.

How can we respond? There are two possibilities. We can respond by *accepting* what God says, *embracing* His relation of love with us OR we can respond with *rejecting* what God says, refusing to acknowledge God's bond of love with sinners. *Accepting* God's promises is to embrace as true and real what God has said about His being our Father and we His children – and so embracing as true also the present reality of His love and His care, knowing oneself safe in His hands. It's to embrace too that He's become our Father because of His gift of His only Son, and so accepting as fact that this Son of God has actually come to earth, suffered on the cross of Calvary because my sins were piled on Him, satisfied the justice of God, died and actually arose from the dead on the third day and today reigns sovereignly in heaven. Accepting God's promises is to embrace too as fact and real that God in the Spirit has made His home in my heart so that I'm born again, yes, am heir to life eternal. Accepting that kind of wealth is my *responsibility* because God made me *able to respond* positively to His relationship with me and so *I must*. Such a response is what the Bible calls 'faith'. Flip side: refusing to respond with embracing what God has promised, saying that you think it's all a load of bunk or that you're not really interested or that you'll sort out your response when you're 70 is what the Bible calls 'unbelief'.

What, then, is faith? Faith is *accepting what God says*. Notice that in Lord's Day 7 the Catechism twice uses the word 'accept' in its discussion on faith. Yet this *accepting* is not a one-time thing (as if it's something I'm to do once and then I'm good for rest of my life), but this accepting is an ongoing activity. Why is it an ongoing activity? It's ongoing because God's relation with me is ongoing. Every day He's my Father and so supplies what I need; every day the Son forgives my sins; every day the Holy Spirit renews me for service to this God. *So every day I need to respond to what God has said and to what God does in my life*. Faith is *repeatedly accepting* God's promises, embracing them again and again in the changing circumstances of my life. That is why I can never say, "I have faith, see, it's over there on the shelf." Faith is action, is accepting every day anew the very real promises of a living God as He gives His promises to me.

By the same token, unbelief is an ongoing activity. Unbelief is rejecting day after day what God has promised, is refusing to accept in life's changing circumstances that God is my Father and I'm safe in His hands, refusing to accept that there is forgiveness of my sins as I commit them, refusing to accept the gift of the Holy Spirit in my heart. It's an ongoing thing, and that's why the Scripture is emphatic that there is space to *repent* of my sins each day.

What we have? The faith I need in order to be saved from the righteous judgment of God is nothing else than humbly embracing God's gracious promises in Jesus Christ, accepting them as true and real. To embrace those promises I obviously need to know what those promises are, and I obviously also need to know that those promises are valid not for Johnny-over-yonder but are true specifically for me. This is Lord's Day 7.21: "True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that Christ has revealed for us in His Word. At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits." It's those who have this faith, that is, it's those who accept God's gracious promises, who will be saved – who will *get* what God has promised to give.

So, then, our second point:

## **2. Why is faith necessary?**

Given all that's been said, the answer to that question is now easy. Faith is necessary because God will not deny Himself. He created us to be *responsible creatures*, and now treats us according to the way He created us to be. He will not short-circuit the responsibility He gave to us, and so we may not assume He will short-circuit it. When we appear before His throne He will treat us as responsible, and so ask of us how we responded to His covenant with us. Anything less than *accepting His relation of love* will prevent God from giving us what He's promised to give – and that's because He takes our responsibility seriously.

So we have an obligation to believe, that is, we have an obligation to respond positively to what He's done for us. God is faithful to Himself and so *will not give you a place in the New Jerusalem if don't react responsibly to His grace*. Do not, beloved, do not presume on His kindness or His mercy! You are responsible! That's to say: daily, in the ups and downs of real life, you are to embrace again and again the rich promises God extends to you in Jesus Christ, promises of His being your Father and you His child, promises of forgiveness of your sins in this life and the life to come, promises of renewing you through His Holy Spirit.

Equally, we parents have an obligation to set before our children the responsibility God lays on them to believe. The temptation is there to think that since our children are covenant children God will for sure work faith in them, God will cause them to respond positively to His promises. Recall here Jacob and Esau, brothers and sisters! Those boys were both covenant children, with the identical

promises of God, the same relation from God to them. But the two boys responded so differently to God's relation with them. The one, by God's grace, accepted and embraced that relationship, while the other rejected that relationship – and he remained eternally responsible for his choice of refusing God. Yet how could Jacob and Esau learn how they ought to respond to God's covenant? That was the task of their parents, Isaac and Rebekah. It was their responsibility as parents to teach their boys to *act responsibly* before God, and that's to say that they had to show the boys and impress on their boys what responding to God had to look like. It is the same today. Our children are God's children by covenant, but they may not presume on God's kindness because God has created them to be responsible – and He treats them that way. So it is for us to teach them to act responsibly in *every* part of life, first of all in responding positively to God.

That brings us to our third point:

### ***3. How do I know whether I have faith?***

That, of course, is the cruncher. What does faith look like in daily living? If faith is so necessary, do I actually have faith? How can I know?? Or might I be fooling myself?

Faith, we said, is *accepting* what God promises. That being so, it's clear that we can describe what faith looks like. For the promises of God are plain. He has established a relation of love with people, and that's to say that He will be our Father and we may be His children. What does embracing that reality look like? Ask a young child what it means to have a father! He's someone to look up to guidance and instruction, someone to entrust yourself to for protection, someone to turn to for answers. And that's the picture Scripture gives of what it means to accept God's promises. So I read of David's confidence in Ps 3. His son Absalom was out to kill him, but David confesses, "You are a shield around me, O LORD." That's why he cried out to God, "and He answers me from His holy hill." As a result David could lie down and sleep, unafraid of Absalom's ten thousand soldiers. That's faith: here's trust in God in the crunch of life-as-it-is.

In His relation with sinners, God promises more than to be our Father. He also promises forgiveness of sins in Jesus' blood. What does embracing that promise look like? Consider David again in Ps 32. He belts out his jubilation: "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered!" It's true: it took David some time to get to the point where he acknowledged his sin, but acknowledge it he ultimately did, and now he's keen to share his sense of liberty with others. That's faith: confession of sin and delight in the good news of forgiveness.

There's more. In his relation with sinners, God promises also to dwell in us (just imagine!) through His Holy Spirit. His indwelling by His Spirit has consequences for the way we live, for those renewed by His Spirit delight to do His will. That, of course, looks like something too. Listen to David in Ps 40. "I desire to do your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart." That's faith: delighting in God's Word, doing it eagerly.

We say: if that's faith..., I guess I fail.... Sleep in peace in the storms of life?? Not a chance; I'm anxious, I'm worried! Open up to God about my sins, and then rejoice so much in forgiveness of my sins that I'll make a point of telling others about forgiveness..., and so about the sins that needed forgiveness...; that's not me either. And that delight to do God's will...; maybe I'll do it, but *delight* in abstaining from what I want... – that's not really me either.... Faith like David had?? I despair of it..., and so I wonder whether I have the faith I need to be saved, whether I'm in fact responding to God's promises as I ought.... It all gets discouraging....

But you have surely noticed, congregation, that there are more psalms of David in the Bible than the three from which I quoted. There's also Ps 38: "O LORD, do not forsake me; be not far from me,

O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Saviour” (vs 21f). Somehow that psalm doesn’t exude the peace-of-soul Ps 3 did. And there’s Ps 51: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out My transgressions” (vs 1). That’s a different sound than David made in Ps 32; Ps 51 lacks the exuberance, the excitement of belonging to God. Even the delight to do God’s will wasn’t David’s constant reality. What do you think was on his mind on that fateful afternoon he spotted Bathsheba?

Yet the man was a believer! His faith was not perfect, and that’s to say that he did not respond positively to God’s relation with him each and every moment of each and every day; David remained a sinner. The devil, the world and his own flesh continued to attack him, and repeatedly David collapsed in the face of these attacks. On that point David was as human and as weak and as guilty as you and I are. Let no one look up to David as if he were some giant of faith towering unreachably above us!

But what, brothers and sisters, did David repeatedly do in the midst of his failures in life’s struggles? Time and again he turned to God, sought God in prayer, sought His forgiveness, sought God’s strength. What that is? In the midst of brokenness he continued to embrace day after day the gracious promises God had given to him in His covenant bond with David-the-sinner. It was all done in so much weakness, and it all had to be done again and again; never did David rise above the struggles of being human. *And your Father in His care for you has told you of br David’s struggles so that you may not feel alone in your struggles of faith!*

But then know also this, my beloved: the great Son of David faced the same temptations to rely on Himself as David faced and we face, and He endured that temptation without denying His God. Throughout all His life, and especially on the cross, Jesus’ faith was perfect; always He responded positively and obediently and submissively to whatever His heavenly Father placed on His path – and He did so for our salvation. His faith was perfect, so that we through *His* faith might be saved!

Shall we then despair at the imperfection of our faith? Shall we throw in the towel and conclude that we don’t really belong after all, that there’s no hope for us? Here, beloved, is the glorious gospel of redemption: the beloved Son your God gave for your salvation has responded in perfect obedience to all the Father placed on His path – and His obedience is written onto your account! We were created to act responsibly, were created to respond positively to the relation of love God established with us. We fail daily to respond as we ought. But the Lord Jesus Christ daily responded as we were supposed to respond. He embraced God’s relation, including when that embracing led Him to the cross. That’s your redemption!

So there’s no need to stare ourselves blind on the weakness of our faith. With good courage we can again turn to the God who made His covenant with us, and again seek His mercy. That’s what David did in his weaknesses – and God heard him, comforted him, and ultimately received him into glory.

God has given His Son as the Mediator for sin. Are all people saved through this Mediator as we all perished through Adam? No, not all. Only those are saved who respond to God’s covenant relation as God has commanded. And that response is faith.

That is the response the elders keep seeing in the congregation. There is room for growth, absolutely, and making sure we grow is certainly our responsibility. But let none be discouraged by imperfect faith. Your God is faithful to His promises in His covenant with you!