

Ps 42:1,3  
Ps 57:1,2  
Ps 109:1,9,10,11  
Ps 56:3,4  
Ps 41:1,2,3,4  
John 19:1-18  
Psalm 41  
Lord's Day 15

Yarrow, February 14, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 15 brings us to the subject of suffering. The term brings to mind the suffering that happens in the world around us – and one can think of the anguish that beset the people of Haiti last month, or the hunger that surrounds the people of North Korea, or the distress affecting millions in the world who have access to minimal health care. By and large, this is suffering that passes us by – and we do well to thank the Lord for that. Circumstances in our corner of the world is the envy of many precisely because our suffering is indeed relatively little.

This takes nothing away, however, from the fact that the suffering we experience is nevertheless real and painful. Some of us suffer acute pain-of-soul because of delinquent children. Others of us battle with the grey skies of depression. Still others of us feel deeply lonely in our marriages. It won't do to belittle the reality and intensity of this suffering. And this is where Lord's Day 15 gives us so much encouragement.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **CHRIST'S SUFFERING TAKES THE CURSE OUT OF OUR SUFFERING**

1. The need for Jesus' suffering,
2. The depth of Jesus' suffering,
3. The gospel of Jesus' suffering.

### ***1. The need for Jesus' suffering.***

All suffering, whether it be that of the people of Afghanistan or of the devout Canadian Christian, is the bitter fruit of the fall into sin. There was in Paradise no suffering; in Paradise there was only the blessing of God and the pleasure of being His children-by-covenant.

The fall into sin changed that. God had said before the fall that any disobedience would earn the penalty of death. Our first parents transgressed God's command, and they died. Their death came complete with much suffering, for themselves and their loved ones who missed them. We can add to the suffering they experienced the pain of childbearing and the tears of fighting weeds in order to feed a family.

The question that needs attention this afternoon, though, is this: why is suffering the consequence of the fall into sin? Yes, God said that the wages of sin would be death (with the suffering that comes with death), but *why must the result of sin be tears and pain and suffering?*

The answer to that question, congregation, lies in the identity of God. So much *God* is He that He is altogether allergic to sin – to the point that He cannot stand sin at all. I read in Habakkuk 1 these

striking words: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong” (vs 13). That explains God’s promise in Genesis 2: If you sin you will *die*. This death, be it physical or spiritual, has painful colour in our daily lives.

It gives us much to think about. We know that sin is wrong. We also know that sin is part of our daily existence. So we take it in stride, consider it normal. But what, congregation, *does God think about sin?* This is the force of what Habakkuk says: God does not take sin in stride! So repulsed is He by sin that He reacts to it powerfully. How does He react to it? He punishes it, punishes it strongly. In the words of Lord's Day 4: God “is terribly displeased with our original sin as well as our actual sins. Therefore He will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally, as He has declared, ‘Cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.’” The fact that God responds with such revulsion to our sins needs to make us sit back and reflect on our own reaction to sin. Taking sin in stride is simply not the way it ought to be.

There, congregation, is the context of Lord's Day 15. It is people who suffer who dare to speak of the suffering of Jesus Christ – and in so doing put into perspective our own suffering.

That brings us to our second and central point this afternoon:

## ***2. The depth of Jesus’ suffering.***

The Christian-who-suffers confesses in Lord's Day 15 that his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ also suffered. As our suffering, so also His suffering pervaded all His life, from cradle to grave. But in its reference to Pontius Pilate and His crucifixion, the Catechism asks attention particularly to the suffering that characterized Jesus’ last days and hours. Here His suffering was the deepest, and it’s from these sufferings that we receive so much instruction and comfort.

As Jesus was celebrating His last Passover shortly before His arrest, He became keenly aware that “the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot ... to betray Jesus” (John 13:2). So He spoke the words of vs 18: “this is to fulfill the Scriptures: ‘He who shares My bread has lifted up His heel against Me’” (John 13:18). We understand the point of Jesus’ words here; one of those who sat at table with Jesus will betray Him.

Several of us have no doubt once upon a time been betrayed by people we considered friends and trusted deeply. Such betrayal leads to profound suffering, sleepless nights, and a sense of anger. Betrayal hurts, hurts deeply.

It turns out that the Scripture Jesus quotes from here is Ps 41. In that psalm David relates that he was desperately sick, confined to his bed, and people came to see him. His visitors included, says David in vs 9, “even my close friend, who I trusted, he who shared my bread.” But when these dear visitors leave David’s sickbed, they whisper amongst each other that “a vile disease has beset him” (vs 8) and they hope David will soon die and his name perish (vs 5). More, when these friends leave David they speak falsely and gather slander, then go out and spread their evil reports abroad ... (vs 6). We recognize: this is betrayal of friendship, and makes for painful suffering.

This is the Scripture Jesus quotes. That’s to say: Jesus shares something of David’s suffering when one of His inner circle of disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrays Him, speaks lies to the chief priests about Him. But notice: Jesus doesn’t just say that He can *relate* to David; He says that through what Judas will do *this Scripture will be fulfilled*. That’s a point to which we need to return shortly.

Some hours later, after His speech of chap 14-16 and His prayer of chap 17, Jesus took His disciples into the Kidron Valley, to the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1). Judas arrived there with the temple police to arrest Jesus. They “bound Him,” says vs 12, and therein subjected this innocent man to

the humiliation that befits a criminal. This action on the part of the temple police invariably brought its own suffering to the Lord, if only because He was anything but a criminal.

But observe what happens next. While Jesus was being interrogated by the temple authorities, His trusted friend and dear companion Peter was warming Himself by yonder fire – and three times denies that He had anything to do with Jesus of Nazareth! Nope, he insisted, I don't know the Man (John 18:17, 25, 27). Peter's denial, we need to know, did not leave Jesus cold; He knew exactly what was happening! What David put into words in Ps 55 was even truer for Jesus; "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me" (vs 4). Why?? Vs 12: "If any enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship...." That Judas would betray Jesus is one thing; that this most trusted and loyal of disciples, Peter himself, would deny Him is painful indeed! O the bitter gall of betrayal!

And while this arrow pierces His righteous soul, Jesus got dragged before Pontius Pilate, the official Roman governor who refused to administer justice. Pilate was adamant that Jesus was innocent (18:38), yet "had Him flogged" (19:1) and permitted the soldiers to slap a crown of thorns on His head (19:2), clothe Him in purple and mock Him – and even slap Him in the face (19:2f). Twice more Pilate insists that Jesus is innocent (19:4,6), and yet hands Him over to be crucified. It's all so unjust, so wickedly wrong! What suffering that brought to Jesus' righteous soul!

And just what, congregation, is crucifixion all about?? We need to know that Roman law forbade that a Roman be crucified, simply because the agony and the humiliation of crucifixion was recognized as too cruel. Only the lowest of society could be treated thus.... As to what happened: a pole with a cross piece attached to it was laid on the ground, then the victim was manhandled into place on that cross and fixed to it with the powerful blows of hammer on nails.... Then the laden cross was hoisted from the ground and carried to the hole prepared for its foot. None too gently, we can imagine, the cross was dropped into the hole of 3 feet deep or 4 – and what utter agony that sudden stop would be for the tearing hands of the victim.... Lest he fall off the cross altogether, a little cross-piece was fixed onto to the cross for him to sort of sit on.... There he hung, shamefully naked, with the hot sun burning down on him and no shade to protect him, while at night the cold rattled his teeth and there was no blanket to protect him.... Meanwhile, the crowds stood around to hurl their insults and to stare.... It was agony, painful, excruciating agony.... A strong man could last some three days before the pain finally killed him.... This was suffering in a way we cannot begin to understand.... Even heathen Rome could think of nothing worse....

But there's another element in it, beloved, that gives the agony of crucifixion so very much more depth. The almighty power of God is such that He could organize the suffering and death of Jesus Christ any way He wanted. The crowds of Nazareth once sought to throw Jesus off the cliff near their town (Luke 4:29). The people of Jerusalem later stoned the evangelist Stephen to death (Acts 7:58). Why did God not have Jesus die through stoning, or through being thrown off a cliff? Or perhaps through a heart attack or the prolonged suffering that comes with cancer? That, brothers and sisters, is because of what the Lord had decreed in Deuteronomy 21. For there the Lord stipulated for Israel that a person hung on a tree was not to be left hanging overnight on the tree "because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (vs 23). Such is the sin of the sinner that earth does not want him and heaven will not have him either and so he is left hanging between the two – cursed by God and man.

This, we need to understand, is what happened to Jesus Christ. It was no accident that the Son of God was crucified. Rather, God sovereignly had a cross available for Him outside Jerusalem precisely because Jesus Christ –and we with Him– should know that God had cursed Him!

Then Jesus on the cross could cry out those painful words of Mt 27: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (vs 46), but those words caught exactly what was happening on the cross: God had rejected His Son, forsaken Him. Or better: God had withdrawn His favour from His Son and left Him in the curse of His holy judgment on sin.

That, congregation, made the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross so terrible! Such is the anger of God on sin that He poured out the full load of His judgment on Jesus Christ; here was complete withdrawal of any divine favour on His Son so that there remained for Jesus only God's concentrated and eternal wrath.

Would you see, then, beloved, a picture of what God thinks of your sins and mine? Look not at the suffering you experience today; your headache and your heartache doesn't begin to capture what the judgment of God on sin looks like. But look instead at Jesus Christ on the cross, at the depth of the anguish He felt in body and soul, and then cry at your realization of what you deserve! Get used to sin, and learn to take it in stride? No, beloved, no! May it never be that we get detached from sin, insensitive to it! God is so much *God* that His revulsion against sin demanded the sort of heart-wrenching punishment that Jesus Christ endured on the cross!

With what determination, then, shall we flee from sin and give our utmost to fight against any and every transgression against God! If this is His reaction, what ought my reaction to be! O Lord, if You would mark transgression, Lord, who could stand...?

Yet, brothers and sisters, there is so very much gospel here, and that's our third point:

### ***3. The gospel of Jesus' suffering***

Suffering, we said before, was the bitter fruit that followed from our fall into sin. Jesus Christ, however, had neither part nor parcel in the fall; though true man He did not sin against His God, was not sinful in any way. The Jews were determined to be rid of Jesus and so brought Him to Pontius Pilate for judgment, but three times in a row Pilate pronounced Jesus innocent of wrong. John 8:38: "I find no basis for a charge against Him." John 19:4: "Look, I am bringing Him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against Him." And John 19:6: "As for me, I find no basis for a charge against Him." Pilate's verdict was not simply the opinion of some uninformed individual; Pilate was the governor, and his finding expressed the official position of the Roman authorities. And as authorities who received their commission from God, they spoke of God's behalf. This man was innocent, did not deserve the abuse He received, let alone the horrors of crucifixion.

Yet, by the providence of God (for nothing comes by chance!), Pilate gave Him over for crucifixion. Why that was? That, congregation, is because *God Himself condemned Jesus!* For the sins of God's people were transferred to Jesus Christ, so that when God the Father looked upon His Son in Pilate's palace He saw not the innocent man Pilate saw but saw instead *the sinner* of all ages. So all the holy judgment of God on sin had to come upon Jesus Christ. The pain that comes with Judas' betrayal of his Master spoke to Jesus' righteous soul of His God turning His face away from Jesus Christ. Whereas David in Ps 41 could turn to His God for help in the face of a friend's betrayal, Jesus increasingly could not count on God's help. The agony that followed hearing Peter's threefold denial of His friend and Saviour pierced the Lord's heart, but Jesus Christ knew that more was happening here than that a dear friend lapsed; God Himself was distancing His favour from His Son because of the sin that was piled on Him. The humiliation of the soldiers' slapping His face was more than depraved people being hurtful; here was holy God expressing His righteous anger on the sins of God's people. This sense of God withdrawing His favour, of God pouring out only His anger against sin upon Jesus Christ came to its climax in the bitter agony of the crucifixion and the darkness that followed, and it

squeezed out of Jesus that tormented cry: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?!” Gone, totally gone was God from Jesus in respect of His favour, and present, totally present was God in relation to Jesus in respect of His righteous anger. No more would He be *Jesus’ God* – and hence His anguished cry: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?!” *The sinner received the judgment....* Make no mistake, congregation: it could not be worse for righteous Jesus!

We learn two things from the Saviour’s suffering. The first concerns the way we see sin. We get used to sin, and learn to take our wrongdoing in stride. That is not how it should be. God created us to image Him, and so His reaction to our sin is the model we’re to follow. As He showed His deep hatred for our sin in the judgment He poured out on Jesus Christ on the cross, so He would have us hate sin with equal revulsion.

Then No, the point is not first of all that we are to show such hatred for *others’* sins (though that too), but the fine point is rather that the Lord would have us show such deep disgust against sin *in relation to ourselves*. Instead of insisting that *another* repent of his sin and take hard steps to break with sin (and yes, we do need to insist on it), we need first to be hard on ourselves in relation to our own sins. Jesus’ words in another place are here to the point. He said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...” (Mt 5:29f). Notice how *radical* Jesus tells His disciples to be, how very intolerant of sin in their own lives. Such behaviour is the inevitable consequence of understanding how much God hates sin – and it’s the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross that displays that hatred so clearly. The apostle Paul uses the same kind of radical language when he tells his readers to “put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Colossians 3:5). “Put to death”: yes, that reflects something of the radical disgust God displayed against sin in Christ’s suffering and crucifixion.

This is a point that needs emphasis. I’ll come shortly to the second thing we’re to learn from Christ’s suffering (and that’s the gospel of deliverance from God’s judgment), but that message of deliverance will never resonate with our children or with our neighbours if they do not see us as offended by our own sin as much as God is. Sorrow for sin needs to be real and not just talk. And the sorrow needs to be on account of personal sin, and not just the neighbour’s sin.

We need now to move on to the second thing we’re to learn from Jesus’ suffering. The curse we deserve was poured on Christ; hence the horrors of His suffering and the curse of His crucifixion. How, now, did Christ bear up under the weight of that divine judgment? John records it; Jesus cried out, “It is finished,” and then bowed His head to die (John 19:30). Point: the Saviour did not succumb under the weight of God’s anger, but satisfied God’s justice, paid for my sin! That’s to say that the penalty I deserve on account of my sin has been paid for! But if Jesus in His suffering paid for my sin, then there is no penalty left for me to pay – for God does not charge twice for the same sins! So Peter could say: Jesus Christ “bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). And Paul: “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

How glorious the wonderful gospel of that! Judgment I deserve on account of my sin, but judgment I do not receive because Jesus Christ received it in my place! Instead of anger from God there is only and always His grace alone; “therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we *have peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). That’s the *present reality* true for every child of God day by day; through His suffering Christ “obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness and eternal life” – realities true *right now!*

That brings us back to the suffering we experience, the suffering David describes in so many of his psalms. Ps 41: how it hurt David that his friend betrayed him – and so many of us can relate to the deep hurt such betrayal awakens. But David in his sorrow did what? He turned to God in prayer, yes, was confident that the Lord would hear him, strengthen him. Why was he confident of that? Not, we understand, because David was such a good man in himself so as to earn God's pleasure! Rather, David was confident that God would hear because Jesus on the cross received the judgment David deserved, and that's to say that Jesus was rejected – so that David might be accepted by God and nevermore be forsaken by Him!

So the sons of Korah in Ps 42 could give expression to the feelings of loneliness and forsakenness that washed over them. Vs 9: "I say to God my Rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?'" But the sons of Korah don't grovel in their pain; they know the answer: God has not forgotten, my feelings are not the measure of reality, for God rejected Jesus Christ on account of my sins so that He would never forsake me despite my sins. Hence Ps 42:11: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God."

There, brothers and sisters, is the glorious gospel of Jesus' suffering! So many of us have those moments when God seems so far away, when looking after us seems to be on the bottom of His to-do list. And that sense can bring about some very acute suffering, deep inside our souls. The Lord tells us the gospel: though you *feel* forsaken, you are not forsaken, simply because Jesus Christ was forsaken *in your place*. He suffered what we deserve, He was cursed so that we might never be forsaken. So in my moment of aloneness and anxiety I can do what David did, and that is *call upon the Lord my God in the confidence that He does hear!*

Our lives come complete with so much suffering, and we certainly don't enjoy it that way. The Lord our God presses the good news of Jesus' suffering onto us – to assure us that the curse is out of the pain we experience. God far away from us when things don't go right? Not so, beloved, not so! Instead, in health and sickness, in riches and poverty, in good days and bad we're safe and secure in the hands of our faithful God and Father. Christ was rejected on account of my sins so that I might never be forsaken!