

Romans 5:8-9
Good Friday – Tenebrae
March 29, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, St Paul says of Christ's sacrificial death this way: "Since, therefore we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last Christmas, I mentioned in my sermon that God knew that sinners would be terrified of His coming, so He had to wrap His Messiah in a form that proved him to be approachable... that all could come safely to the manger, draw near the humble child, and approach the Christ of the living and holy God.

Unfortunately, it seems many Christians have learned this only too well. Or, perhaps better said, they have misinterpreted the approachability of the *Christ* to be equal to the approachability of *God* without the need for Christ. They have been taught to assume, even abuse, the safety and approachability of God. Lutheran theologian Herman Sasse commented on this nearly a century ago by saying,

"The conception of God in modern Protestantism since the age of the Enlightenment has completely lost every trace of terror... If the modern man believes in God at all, he believes in him as the guarantor of [man's] happiness..."

That *is* a pretty common conception of “Christianity” among our generation, isn’t it? – a Christianity without need for Christ? That – if this ‘Christianity’ (so prevalent in America) is to be believed – it needs to prove how God is guaranteeing our happiness, how He’s giving me my best life now. Far from *terror* before the living God, man has become *entitled* before the living God... has put himself in the place of judging whether God is worth his time. Hope in God’s forgiveness and salvation has been replaced with demand for God’s servitude and blessings. Yes, it seems the modern man (or, perhaps we’d now call him the postmodern man) is pretty confident that he’s safe standing in the presence of – indeed standing *over* – the living God.

But Martin Luther’s confession of the faith is such a gift to us, not only because of its comfort, but because of its honesty... its honesty that man needs to think twice before assuming his place before God Most High. Luther’s confession is captured and paraphrased by Sasse this way:

“[But] if God exists, and if he really is God, then man is lost. Created to do God’s will, and incapable of its fulfillment, [man] is guilty of the judgment [of God.] And how can man hope to stand before the God of heaven and his unerring judgment?”
(Lonely Way, Vol. I, p. 325)

That is an honest assessment. *That* is the truth of what it means to be a sinner before God: “If you, O Lord, [...] mark iniquities, O

Lord, who could stand?” Again, “O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath.” Again, the Scriptures warn, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.”

Now, I don't have to pound this point home, because our Lutheran confession teaches well that which Protestantism has lost; it teaches the *fear* of God: “We should fear and love God,” the explanations of the commandments begin. Yes, we should *fear* God's wrath and not do anything against His commandments, the explanation to the Conclusion of the Commandments tells us. And rightly so, for Jesus himself says, “Fear the One who destroys both body and soul in hell.” (That's not the devil; that's God!)

Indeed, all the religions of the world can smugly claim that they can stand before God with their own pious hearts, their own good works, their own exerted efforts, their own holy intentions and God will be pleased with them. But, you know the truth. You know that man standing before the holy God would *not* end in self-justification, but self-condemnation. You know that man assuming God in his holiness is so approachable... you know that will not end well. You know that you need Christ crucified to stand (or, for the sake of the image, to hang on the cross) between you and the holiness of God... as our text says, “Since we have been

justified by his blood, how much more will we be saved from the wrath of God.”

Indeed, when we think of our relationship with God *apart from Christ*, there is nothing but uncertainty and fear... for we know we do not meet God’s holiness, and our sin deserves nothing but His wrath and anger. We *know* that (in theory).

And yet, in daily life, how often do we forget it? How often do we slide into the modern protestant mindset that thinks that God is ‘approachable *enough*’ in my own piety, if I’m just pious enough. But then, when I am faced with my sins, even *that* ‘approachable enough’ view of God becomes a threatening reminder of His righteous wrath and anger over sin.

For example, in daily life, in *real* life... how many of you – when you have come to the pastor’s study – have wrestled with doubts about your standing before God. For 10, 15, 20 minutes, you pour out your soul with sweaty palms, nervous knees, rightly shedding tears over your sin, sweating bullets at what God must think of you (where you stand before God)... and then I ask you, “What word haven’t you mentioned at all in these last 20 minutes? – Christ! Where is Christ in all of this!”

Yes, if you want a clear conscience before God... if you want God to truly be approachable, if you want to no longer be terrorized by the prospect of being judged by God’s holiness, you

must have Christ crucified at the center. Not just in history, but also in your daily life hope and confession.

Now, we have to be careful with that, lest we become enthusiasts who believe their standing before God lies in their heart. In your daily life, you can say a thousand times, “Christ is there for me in my heart,” but if he was not there for you on the cross 2000 years ago, then you are still subject to God’s wrath. But precisely *because* Christ was there on that cross for you 2000 years ago outside the city walls of Jerusalem, therefore you may also live daily life clinging to him in your heart.

Indeed, for the sake of your atonement, Jesus had to go to the cross; for the sake of your conscience, you must cling to Jesus – not so much by ‘clinging to him in your heart,’ but rather by your heart clinging to the report of Jesus 2000 years ago on the cross. *Luther* speaks this way when he says ,

You cast your sins from yourself and onto Christ when you firmly believe that his wounds and sufferings are your sins, to be borne and paid for by him, as we read in Isaiah 53, “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” St Peter says, “In his body has he borne our sins on the wood of the cross.” The more your conscience torments you, the more tenaciously you must cling to [these verses as they speak of Christ in your place.] If you do not do that, but presume to still your conscience with your contrition and penance, you will never obtain peace of mind, but will have to despair in the end. If we

allow sin to remain in our conscience and try to deal with it there, or if we look at sin in our heart, it will be much too strong for us and [it] will live on forever. But if we behold it resting on Christ and see it overcome by his resurrection, and then boldly believe this, even *it* (the sin) is dead and nullified. Sin cannot remain on Christ, since it is swallowed up by his resurrection.

And not just Luther, but Jesus himself (in John 3) says of Christ crucified as the determinant of your justification before God (and therefore as the clear conscience of daily life), “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Or, as St Paul points us all to the cross, he says, “God, in Christ, was reconciling the world unto Himself.” In Christ! *Apart* from Christ, only God’s purity magnifying our impurity, His glory highlighting our shame, His holiness condemning our unholiness. But, in Christ, God’s mercy means our justification, His sacrificial offering means our atonement, His grace means our reconciliation.

And that is a truth to which your heart may cling, not by turning in on itself and trying to clear its own conscience, but by recognizing the wondrous historic truth of what happened *outside* your heart and *beyond* the wrestlings of your conscience. Indeed, a truth so central to all of history that it goes all the way back to Eden. Adam and Eve could have hope, God could declare the

gospel to the enemy in fallen Eden, because this image was already emblazoned in the throne-room of heaven – “the Lamb slain since the foundation of the world.”

But, if we are going to read our text correctly (hear it again, “...much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God”)... if we are going to read that and meditate upon it correctly, we must learn that the cross does not just reverberate *back* to Eden, but also *forward* to the second coming. (You might even have paused there and thought to yourself, “what do you mean, ‘much more *shall* we be saved’? Haven’t we already been saved?”) – a question symptomatic of only looking *backward*. We must not learn to only look *backward* with the cross of Christ, but also to look *forward*:

When we only look backward with the cross of Christ, we believe that the cross changed God into a God of love, where he formerly was a God of wrath. This is how so many convince themselves God will have no anger over their faithless impenitence – He’s now supposedly ONLY “God of love”! But the cross wasn’t about changing God, it was about saving and redeeming us... *from* ourselves, and *therefore* from God’s righteous wrath. That righteous wrath against sin still is there, for God is still holy. But, now that we are safe in Christ – declared

righteous by the blood of Christ's cross – we may meditate rightly on the holy God's entire relationship with man.

You see, the cross doesn't just point backward further into history; you can't just look backward and say "God used to be a God of wrath now he's a God of love." No that's chopping up God's relationship with man into historical chunks, dispensations.

Instead, the cross also points to what is *to come* because God's relationship with man is, in Christ, forever the same. In Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever... He who is our Lamb slain since the foundation of the world... in Him, God's relationship with man is **forever** the same – in Christ, God is reconciled with sinners and, in His mercy, loves the whole world; apart from Christ, God in His holiness condemns the unbelieving world.

So, the cross calls you to look at what is to come *in the safety* of the lens of the cross. In the safety of the lens of the cross, you may acknowledge: the wrath of God *is* coming, just as our text says – "how much more will we be saved... (aren't we already saved from sins? Yes, but we will be saved and delivered)... "from the wrath of God [to come]." When the holy God unveils His glory – actually, to be more specific – when the Man of Sorrows comes as the Man of Glory... when the One

rejected by many comes again to be their Judge, wrath will be unleashed.

But, *you* are safe. Safe in Christ Jesus. For in Christ Jesus, God was reconciling us unto himself and not counting our trespasses against us. And, if Christ saved us from God's wrath by his death, how much more will he save us and defend us and intercede for us by his resurrected life? The One who laid down his life for us now stands before God and makes intercession for us forever. Indeed, He Himself is given by the Father the throne of the judgment seat... so that, the One who will come to be our judge is the One who has already been our Redeemer, already ransomed us by His blood.

Thus, you ought honor and revere God's holiness – never dismiss or downplay the reverence of His holiness, which laid Christ in the grave... and, nevertheless, you may live with a clear conscience before God, an eager joy in confessing Christ's atoning death and celebrating anew Christ's resurrection, and waiting patiently for the wrath of God to be revealed upon the unbelieving world on that last day, at which will also be revealed the vindication of your hope in Christ crucified.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
March 29, 2024