

Ps 6:1,2
Hy 1A
Ps 39:4,5,6
Ps 94:6,7
Ps 32:2,3
Numbers 11:1-6; 10; 18-20; 31-34
1 Corinthians 11:23-34
Revelation 2:1-7
Lord's Day 4

Yarrow, October 18, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 2 had admitted the terrible revelation of Scripture that we are “inclined by nature to hate God and [the] neighbour.” Lord's Day 3 had added that this tragic state of affairs was not because the Lord God somehow made a mistake in how He created us (and it wasn't because we're still an evolving species either); rather, “God created man good and in His image.” We, though, in Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command in Paradise and so “our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.” The question now is: since the fact that we hate God and neighbour is our own fault (in defiance of how God made us), *how does God respond to our sinfulness?*

That's Lord's Day 4. The Catechism's answer is heart-numbing: 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.” The colour of the judgment is worked out a bit more in Answer 11, where the Catechism mentions “the most severe, that is, ... everlasting punishment of body and soul.”

This is not, we perceive, inspiring material. Yet this is material, congregation, we need to comprehend and believe if we are to live and die in the joy of the comfort of Lord's Day 1. So I summarize the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

RIGHTEOUS GOD PUNISHES SIN IN THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT.

1. This punishment is real,
2. This punishment has a reason,
3. This punishment prompts gratitude.

1. This Punishment is Real

Our Lord's Day makes a distinction between two kinds of sin. There's a reference to “our original sin” as well as a reference to “our actual sins”. The “original sin” refers to the “fall and disobedience of our first parents Adam and Eve in Paradise,” the material of which we made confession last week with Lord's Day 3. It's a sin we'd somehow prefer to write onto our first parents' account, for (we say) they ate the fruit of the Garden and we did not. But, as we heard last week, the Lord holds us responsible for that transgression; we were “in Adam” and so responsible for our own depravity.

The other term, the “actual sins” mentioned in Lord's Day 4, describes the transgressions we commit day by day as we walk the road of life. We recognize that, since we are responsible for our own sinfulness, we are also responsible for the things we do wrong day by day.

The Catechism says that God “is terribly displeased” with both our original sin as well as our actual sins. This ‘terrible displeasure’, of course, looks like something. That’s to say: it expresses itself in particular punishment “both now and eternally.”

Now, we know from Scripture that God has indeed punished our original sin, that fall in Paradise. For the human race used to live in a Garden of plenty, with never a tear or a heartbreak, no pain or sickness or grief. That changed with the fall, for the Lord God exiled the human race from His presence and sent us into a world of thorns and thistles, of sweat and tears, of sickness and death (Genesis 3:15ff). The result is that the whole human race –and that includes us today in our little corner of God’s world– know of brokenness and grief. We see on TV the ravages of war, the gaunt faces and fat bellies of the hungry, the devastating effects of tsunamis and earthquakes, the empty gaze of drug addicts, and the list goes on and on. We taste the bitter effects of the fall into sin ourselves with our issues with health and finance, our issues with strained interpersonal relations in home and work, etc. We live in a fallen world, and we’re well aware that if we still lived in Paradise these problems would not exist. Yes, we recognize that the Lord God has punished our original sin with the thorns and thistles of life outside Paradise. This is a reality we’ve come to live with, and we recognize there’s nothing we can do about it. So we’re also thankful that the Lord in mercy has sent His Son, and we believe that He will come again to restore us to Paradise renewed, where –as John says in Revelation 21– there shall be no more pain and tears and mourning, “for the old order of things has passed away” (vs 4). In the midst of life’s brokenness, we look forward eagerly to that day.

But the Catechism, congregation, mentions in Lord's Day 4 more than “original sin” and more than a just judgment on that original sin. There’s reference too to “actual sins”, those daily sins we commit day by day, and God’s righteous punishment on them. That righteous punishment, the Catechism hastens to add, occurs “both now and eternally.” And here is where questions and problems arise for us.

For: has the Lord not punished our sins in Jesus Christ? Were our sins not transferred to the Saviour so that He on the cross of Calvary suffered the infinite wrath of God that our sins deserved? Is that not the glorious gospel of the forgiveness of sins? And if Jesus Christ has in fact paid for all our sins through His perfect sacrifice on the cross, does that not mean that there is no judgment left for us on our sins? Then how come the Catechism can still say that God is so “displeased with ... our actual sins” that “He will punish them by a just judgment” not only eternally (and we understand that to be a reference to hell, where the unbelievers go) *but also “now”*? How are we to square the confession of Christ’s work on our behalf with the statement that God punishes our sins in this life? Are they not mutually exclusive??

In relation to unbelievers, we have no difficulty accepting that they suffer in this life the due penalty for their sins. So we accept that the evil and unbelieving people of Noah’s day died in the flood as God’s righteous judgment on their sins. We equally have no difficulty accepting that the evil and apostate people of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed on account of their sins.

Our difficulties arise when it comes to God’s own people suffering the punishment of God on their sins, be it in this life or the life to come. Yet the Bible, congregation, is emphatic that God’s people most certainly can –and do– experience in this life the just judgment of God on their sins. We read together a portion from Numbers 11. Please remember that the people of this chapter were God’s people by covenant, treasured by Him, and they had the gospel of redemption proclaimed to them faithfully. Not that many months ago the Lord established with this people His covenant of grace at Mt Sinai, and instructed them to build the tabernacle in their midst. Sacrifices were made in that

tabernacle daily to impress upon the people that God was their God because of the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ; His blood would cover their sins. This people had also pledged their allegiance to God, indicated their devotion to Him and their embrace of the gospel of free grace. My point: at the end of the day, these people were as rich as we are, and they embraced the same gospel we embrace. But they “complained about their hardships” (vs 1a), and “when [God] heard them His anger was aroused.” In the words of our Lord's Day: God “was terribly displeased with [their] actual sins,” and He expressed His hot displeasure by sending “fire from the LORD” to burn among them so that “some of the outskirts of the camp” were consumed (vs 1b). There's the “just judgment” of God that hit them “now” – and the result was a number of burials, and deep grief in many tents.

Again (vs 4), “the rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat!’” The term ‘rabble’ describes the Egyptian riffraff that accompanied Israel out of Egypt. Because of their cravings the Israelites in turn began to complain also about the manna they received each day. Vs 10: “Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance of his tent.” God's reaction to the “actual sin” of His very own people, the people to whom He gave redemption through Jesus Christ was this: “the LORD became exceedingly angry” (vs 10b). Such was God's anger that –vs 33– “while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and He struck them with a severe plague.”

This, congregation, was not unique. I can tell you of the leprosy with which God afflicted the godly woman Miriam (Numbers 12). I can tell you of the penalty that God handed out to His people when they rejected the advice of the two faithful spies in Numbers 14, a penalty that saw every person in Israel over the age of 20 refused entry into the Promised Land on account of their sin of being afraid of the inhabitants of Canaan. And say not, beloved, that every adult in Israel in Numbers 14 was an ungodly person! The gospel of forgiveness of sins as proclaimed in the tabernacle was for them! I can tell you of God's penalty on Moses' transgression of hitting the rock, of how this man –and if anyone was pious it was certainly Moses!– was forbidden entry into the Promised Land. I can tell you of the suffering Israel experienced in the days of the Judges, how this people sinned against the Lord with their idolatry and God handed them over to the Midianites and the Philistines and so many other enemies, with as result that the people of Israel –the not so pious as well as the very pious– suffered under the heavy hand of God's judgment.

But let me not stay with the Old Testament, as if this were simply an Old Testament puzzle. The apostle Paul wrote a letter to “the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy” (1 Corinthians 1:2). This was a congregation of true Christian believers who were washed in Jesus' blood, sanctified and sealed through the Holy Spirit (cf Article 27, *Belgic Confession*). Yet within this congregation there were those who attended the Holy Supper in an unworthy manner. Note: these were Christians, who saw the need to eat at the table of the Lord; these were not ungodly and unbelieving people, but persons who embraced the gospel of redemption in Jesus' blood as signified and sealed to them in this Supper. Yet Paul tells them on the authority of the Holy Spirit that there's a *reason why* “many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 11:30). Imagine that: God was so displeased with the sins of His children in Corinth that He punished His church in that city by a just judgment right there on the spot! Nothing of: their sins are forgiven in Jesus' blood so that there's no punishment possible for them anymore....

We read too from Revelation 2. Jesus Christ from His throne in heaven sent through John a letter to some of His churches in Asia Minor. To Ephesus He wrote: “You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:4f). In the years

that followed, the Lord Jesus Christ in fact did “remove the lampstand” from Ephesus; no longer did the light of the gospel shine in that city, for God in His providence let the church in that place die out. Why?? Not because they were all ungodly people! But He did it because they had forsaken their first love. That is: in the course of years they’d lost the depth of an active communion of saints. That was sin before God, and there was a penalty for that sin; by the just judgment of God their light was snuffed out. And that’s the pattern that comes back time and time again in the Book of Revelation.

To be sure, this is not a thought with which we’re comfortable. We’d much rather hear of the gospel of forgiveness of sins than of God’s just judgment on our sins in this life. Our inclination is very much with Q 11, to say that God is merciful, so ‘Tell me about the mercy’. But in your own Catechism, congregation, you confess that your God punishes sins in this life....

So we’re left with big questions. Are our sins not washed away?! Or does God perhaps punish our sins twice – once when Christ paid for our sins, and then another time when we have to suffer for our sins? How does this work?!

It’s our second point:

2. This Punishment has a Reason.

No, congregation, the Lord our God does not punish sin twice. Sins placed on Jesus’ shoulders have been fully atoned for. Those sins are taken away such that there is no more punishment from God on those sins – be it that we may still need to live with the *consequences* of those sins. That, of course, is a different matter than the one confessed in our Lord's Day.

The thing is, though, that sinners do not place all sin on Jesus’ shoulders. That’s obviously true in relation to unbelievers, and so we are not surprised that they receive the just penalty for their transgressions in this life and the life to come. But, brothers and sisters, it can be true also in relation to believers! Not all sins we commit are automatically washed away.

How so, you ask? There is need for *repentance* from sin, and *confession* of sin. Back to that letter from Jesus Christ to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2. Jesus describes His church’s transgression, then adds the instruction to “repent”. He adds further, “If you do not repent, I will ... remove your lampstand” (vs 5). Jesus’ point is clear: to receive the freedom from judgement that flows from Christ’s work on the cross, one needs to be pious in the service of the Lord.

The same message comes through in that passage to the Corinthians. Because of these Christians’ selfish attitude in coming to the Lord’s Table, “many among you,” says Paul, “are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (and that’s to say that they died). Paul explains why it’s so. He says, “But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment” (vs 31). His point is plain; these Corinthian Christians did not give thought to whether they were living in sin, but simply assumed that the death of Jesus Christ covered all their transgressions. In the words of Lord's Day 4.11, they assumed that “God was indeed merciful.” But Paul is adamant. Sure, God is merciful, “but He is also just. His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting, punishment of body and soul.” That heavy hand of God’s punishment pressed upon the Corinthian congregation in the here and now –why?– because of their failure to judge themselves. They failed, in other words, to acknowledge sin, to fight sin, to repent of sin. And they were paying the price with the deaths in their midst.

And no, there’s nothing new in this. Jesus Christ put it plainly in Luke 13, when people told Him about “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” in the temple. Said He, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish. Or those eighteen who died when the

tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (vss 1-5).

It leaves us confused, and distressed. Bad things happen in our lives. Does the fact that something bad happened in my life mean that I have sinned and haven't repented?? As in: the tragedy is my own fault??

John Calvin, congregation, put it this way: when a believer is struck by a calamity, he “immediately descends into himself to consider his sins” (*Institutes*, III.4.32). That is: according to Calvin the believer accepts the fact that God does not let sin go unpunished, believes that sin is punished in Jesus Christ, and so will examine himself to ensure that he's not left particular sins unconfessed in his own life. That, says Calvin, is the proper default Christian response to trouble; it's self-examination. Have I failed to repent of particular sins? Are there things happening in my life that I know are wrong but I just assume that God's OK with those wrongs? Am I through hardness of heart preventing God's blessing and attracting God's curse? Calvin is insistent: the pious Christian knows his own sinfulness and stubbornness, knows there can be no blessing from God today if one does not today turn away from every sin he knows of, and so is quick to re-examine whether he has in fact repented of all sin.

In fact, congregation, this posture has been the driving force of Christian spirituality for generations, and it produced a style of living that took God's commands seriously. But in our day this sense of God punishing unrepentant sin in this life is downplayed or ignored. It's downplayed or ignored specifically by telling ourselves that our sins don't have consequences because there is forgiveness in Jesus' blood anyway.

But here is where we fool ourselves. We think in terms of 'easy forgiveness', for Christ died for us. But your Catechism, brothers and sisters, confesses in Answer 10 that God is terribly displeased with original as well as actual sins, and so punishes them justly in this life and the life to come. And when the Catechism then puts the question that we use to defend our behaviour –it's Question 11, “Is God not also merciful?”– the Catechism is quick to reassure us *not* of God's easy mercy in Jesus Christ, but to reassure us instead of His justice. That's answer 11: “His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.” The Catechism wants us to know: do not presume on the kindness and mercy of God! Instead, your default position has to be: sin earns God's judgment; I receive tribulation from God; what sin am I tolerating in my life, in my family, in my work, in my church? I shall need to be critical and ruthless in self-examination, and I shall need to repent of whatever sins I find, lest God's hand crush me further.

Then it certainly may be true that I have a clear conscience before God, that I have acknowledged my transgressions before God and repented of them. Then, says Calvin, there can be a second reason why the Lord may chastise you with His admonitions. It's also possible, he says, that God “imposes a penalty upon us – not to punish us for past sins, but to correct us against future ones” (*Institutes*, III.4.33). Calvin quotes Augustine, “What you suffer, what you complain about, is your medicine, not your penalty; your chastisement, not your condemnation. Do not put away the scourge if you do not want to be put away from the inheritance.” But I may not, says Calvin, jump lightly to the conclusion that God is simply pruning me so that I grow in holiness. That may well be God's motive, but given my abiding sinfulness I need first to examine myself carefully.

We find it all discouraging.... Is this all that can be said in relation to Lord's Day 4? No, brothers and sisters, there is more. It's our last point:

3. This punishment prompts Gratitude.

For: who, brothers and sisters, is the person who makes the heart-numbing confession of Lord's Day 4? Is this the person who has to strive to win God's approval through his works?? Is this the person who is crushed under the weight of God's heavy hand? No, congregation, no! Rather, the person who makes the confession of Lord's Day 4 is very same person who has already made the confession of Lord's Day 1. That's to say: it's the person who belongs to Jesus Christ every moment of every day, belongs to Him because Christ has paid for his sins through His precious blood.

The confessor of Lord's Day 4, then, begins with the reality of forgiveness, and so rejoices that a God who hates sin so much has yet given so much forgiveness; I'm free from Satan's bondage. But the confessor of Lord's Day 4 doesn't stop there, for he adds that the God who redeemed him now loves him deeply, so much so that He makes "all things ... work together for my salvation." But this gracious God still hates sin passionately and knows too that sin hurts His children – to that point that hardening in sin will strangle His children. More, He knows that His people are not yet perfect; though they want to do what is right they are not able (as Paul put it in Romans 7). So what does our faithful Father in Jesus Christ do? When we fail to repent of sin He presses His hand upon us –and yes, that hurts; we experience it as punishment– *because He wants to move us to repentance*. That is His love for His people!! This is God's way of getting my attention so that I repent of the sins I've allowed in my life, in my home, in my sphere of responsibility; He wants my attention so that I turn away from sin in humility and follow His way-of-life once more.

We're all agreed: it's not fun to experience God's heavy hand in this life. But given the depth of His love for me –He gave His Son for my sin!– it follows that He does not want me through my sins to make it impossible for Him to bless me. In His love He calls for my attention, my repentance. So His hand of chastisement is in fact exciting. In adversity I'll confess with gratitude He "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." So, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, I'll heed His call to repentance, and make a point –as Lord's Day 1 says it– to live for Him, heartily and readily again.