

Ps 146:2,3  
Ps 40:4  
Ps 130:2,3,4  
Ps 51:6  
Hy 24:1,3,4,7  
Hebrews 2:14-18  
Revelation 16:1-11  
Lord's Day 5 & 6.16-18

Yarrow, November 1, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With Lord's Day 5 we move out of the section in the *Heidelberg Catechism* describing our Sin and Misery, and move into the section where we make confession of our Deliverance. It's a development we welcome, for we find the emphasis in Lord's Days 2-4 on our brokenness to be discouraging...

It turns out that we move slowly and carefully into the subject matter of deliverance, and that's a good thing. For before we can properly appreciate the value of the redemption God has provided in Jesus Christ, we need to admit that any other perceived avenue of deliverance is impossible. Good works, saints, sharks, science and technology: all are written off – so that in turn we are made to marvel at the God who graciously *gave* redemption to the bankrupt.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

## RECONCILIATION WITH GOD OUR MAKER IS GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT IN JESUS CHRIST.

1. The folly of human efforts,
2. The marvel of God's mercy,
3. The consequence that follows.

### 1. Our efforts

Question 12 contains within itself a statement summarizing the conclusion of Lord's Day 4. The statement is simply this, "According to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment." Lord's Day 4 had built on the confession of Lord's Day 3 that sin entered the world through our fall and disobedience in Paradise, and admitted that God was deeply indignant on account of our transgression. He had created us without any flaw, given us the privileged position of imaging Him to other creatures (even making us masters over His world), and we arrogantly rebelled against Him. Such is God's justice that He could not "allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished"; in fact, "He is terribly displeased with our original sin as well as actual sins" – to the point that "He will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally." So the ungodly of Noah's days perished in the flood, and the ungodly of Sodom and Gomorrah perished with their cities. Even the people of Israel experienced the heavy hand of God on their sins as God through punishment sought to move them to repentance and/or cause them to grow in Him. This heavy hand of God is not something of long ago alone, but He remains sovereign in today's world also and –says the book of Revelation– continues to pour out His plagues on sin-loving mankind.

So there's the question: is there any way we can escape this punishment? We don't like to have God as our enemy; is there anything we can do to befriend Him? Anything that will gain us a place in His favour – as it used to be in Paradise? That's the first question of our Lord's Day: "How can we escape this punishment and be again received into favour?"

We could, brothers and sisters, jump straight to the conclusion that we need Jesus Christ, as we confess in Lord's Day 6.18. But it's worth our while to slow down for a minute.

It happens in our homes regularly that a teenager (or younger child) has a run-in with his father, and knows that he's now going to get it. What do you, young people, do to escape Dad's anger? Do you have options? It turns out that young people (and this has been true of every generation) find all kinds of options. Blame shifting is a favourite one; we covered it previous time with Lord's Day 4. Another common option –and it works too– is to go out and *wash Dad's car*. We know from experience: trying to work your way into Dad's good books can pay off handsomely.

Well now, can we do the same with God? Can we somehow do something, offer something, that will appease God's anger, buy off His fair judgment? Truth be said, we try it. We know we've offended God, earned His judgment, and ... so we try to escape that judgment by doing, eg, longer devotions, reading more Bible, being more diligent in prayer. Or perhaps we put more in the collection bag, or are extra sweet to loved ones we've wronged. You recognize what I'm describing; this is an effort through good works to win God's favour, and so lessen His righteous penalty on our sins. We're familiar, of course, with Roman Catholic thinking on the point, and know it's wrong. But the fact of the matter is that our natural response to having offended God is *to do exactly that the Roman Catholics over the years have formalized*. And that's easy to explain; they have given place in their official church doctrine for that which comes naturally and easily to us, what we actually do regularly in our family relations to regain a parent's favour.

That's why Question & Answer 13 is so to the point. Can we in any way buy off God's righteous judgment against our sins? Is there anything we can do to calm His anger, get out from under His judgment? It's a point of fact that we repeatedly *act* as if the answer is yes, but –we confess in our Lord's Day– the answer in fact is No.

Why is the answer No? That's simple. God's standard is perfection. Even our best works remain imperfect, and so unacceptable to Him. Case in point: He knows that our efforts to impress Him, to win His favour so as to get off the hook of His judgment, are selfishly motivated; we're out to preserve our own hide, don't want the discomfort of His judgment. That's selfishness. Yet He created us for His glory, and that's to say that we're to be God-centred in all we do. We fail badly in that, and that's why Jesus Christ told us to pray for forgiveness of sins – and pray that petition not just once in a while but just as often as we pray for "daily bread" (Mt 6:12).

We can't, then, pay off God's anger at our sins through reading the Bible more, or praying more, or doing deeds of charity, or any other such good work. Do we have other options to get out from under God's judgment?

Let's return to how things go in our homes. If washing Dad's car isn't going to take sufficient heat out of Dad's anger against me, what else can I do to prevent the worst? Easy, we've all tried it: we'll talk to Mom, explain to her, get her to put in a word for me.... Or talk to a sister, or a grandparent, anyone to put in a word for me.... And at home it might even work....

Can we do that with God? Given how often people try precisely this tack over the years, you'd have to conclude that mileage is possible. After all, why else have people sought to pray to Mary, or to Peter, or to any other saint? The purpose was to get Mary or Peter or anyone else to put in a good

word to God on your behalf, somehow to take something away from the heat of God's anger against your sin. You say: that's Roman Catholic theology, and we know better. Indeed, it's Roman Catholic doctrine. And here again the Roman Catholic Church has given legal place to the exact practice we see repeatedly in our own homes, and they've given it legal place because the human mind will look for any possible way to get out from under the just judgment of God.

But getting a saint to put in a word for us to God won't help appease His righteous anger against my sin. Getting the angel Gabriel to put in a word for us (assuming we could speak to him) wouldn't help either. Nor would sacrificing a few sheep, or even offering a young maiden to God, or a child. It's happened many times in the course of history, including Israel's history and even church history. But the prophet Micah puts it plainly: "With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Micah 6:6f). The very fact that Micah asks the question the way he does makes the answer self-evident; we can find ways and means, directly or indirectly, to take the heat out of Dad's anger against us, but we cannot do so with the Lord God.

Why not? The Catechism puts it plainly. Answer 12: "full payment must be made," not partial. So, if I send another to deflect (part of) the heat of the Lord's anger away from me, that other person (or creature) will need to suffer on my behalf. Yet the Lord has said emphatically through Ezekiel: "the soul that sins shall die" (18:4). I cannot expect Mary to suffer a portion of what I deserve. It's Answer 14: "God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed." That's true in relation to people suffering for us; it's equally true in relation to angels or animals suffering in our place.

On top of that, even if I managed to find someone else to appear in God's presence on my behalf, a volunteer to take on himself the anger I deserve. What would happen to him? The prophet Nahum describes what God's anger is like, speaks of God's anger as being "poured out like fire" (1:6). The picture is of an enormous caldron of fire being tipped onto somebody. Obviously, the person on whom a caldron of fire falls will perish. Then even if I could get the angel Gabriel to speak to God on my behalf, or Mary or Peter or some other saint (to say nothing of my dog or my goat), the caldron of God's wrath against my sin would destroy Gabriel and Mary and Peter and my dog and my goat – and whoever or whatever else I could coax into speaking with God about my sin. Please, brothers and sisters, do not think lightly of the terrible anger of God against sin! Recall how "the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man" responded to the anger of God as Christ described it to John in Revelation 6. All, says that passage, "hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains," and even as they hid "they called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'" (vss 15f). If these mighty men of the earth could not stand before God in the face of His anger against their own sins, how much less could they stand in the face of His anger against their own sins *plus* against the sins of others – even *my* sins?! This is the content of the second part of Answer 14: "No mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it."

Where does that leave us? In the face of human anger, we might decide to run away or hide for a while, until the storm of anger is past. In the face of God's righteous and holy anger on account of our transgressions, that simply does not work. We can't get away from God, as Jonah found out so painfully. God's anger does not cool after a night's sleep, for He's above that kind of fickleness. (That, by the way, means that our displeasure on account of our children's sins may not wear off after a night's sleep either; we need to address their sins and they need to repent of them. Otherwise we give our children a false understanding of who God is!) The long and short is this: we are not able to find a way

to escape out from under God's judgment. Our sins deserve His punishment, in this life and the next, and we do not have what it takes to get out from under it.

That, however, is not the last word on the topic. Just because we can't find a way of escape doesn't mean that there isn't one! That's our second point:

## 2. God's grace

It has pleased the Lord, congregation, *graciously to supply a solution* to this pressing and vexing problem. It is fact that God is absolutely fair and just in His punishments, and so will never do what happens in our homes. For in our homes we can blame shift, and the result can be that I get punished for my sister's sins. God is fair; "the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin." No passing the buck.

So what has God done? This: He *sent His only eternal Son into this world* to redeem the world. Think about it: in a way we can never comprehend, the Father had from eternity one Son who was always with Him in glory. This Son was deeply loved by the Father, was in fact one with the Father (and the Spirit). But there came the moment when the Father sent this Son out of the splendours of heaven to live on earth for a period of time. Admittedly, God had come to earth before. Adam in Paradise knew "the sound of the LORD God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8), and that's because He came more often to them. At Mt Sinai God Himself came to Israel in the cloud on the mountain, and later moved into the tabernacle Israel built for Him – and later again moved into the temple Solomon constructed. But here's the thing now: when God came to earth amongst His people, He unmistakably remained *God* – majestic, glorious; think of the cloud that filled the tabernacle. But when He sent His Son to earth, this Son became as human as we are. His mother Mary and the wise men from the east could not see any difference in Him compared to other children; He wore no halo, it is not true that 'no crying He made'. He was a normal toddler who had to learn to walk, learn to run, learn to kick a ball. Like each of us over the years, He had to learn to work, had to agonize over his studies, contended with the flu. By the time He was thirty He was simply known in His community as "Joseph's son" (Luke 4:22; cf Mt 13:54ff). The apostle to the Hebrews can say that Jesus Christ was "made like His brothers in every way" (2:17), even "shared in their humanity" (2:14) and so "has been tempted in every way, just as we are" (4:15).

It is, congregation, an incredible thought. God Himself in the Son became man! To put it differently, the Creator (for the Father created all things through Him, Colossians 1:16) became a creature! It baffles the imagination, but such is the glorious revelation of Scripture. More: even as He became a creature, He remained the Creator; even as He became a man (as frail and subject to the effects of the fall into sin as we are) He remained true God. That too baffles the imagination! I struggle to understand, I want to understand how He's God and man at the same time, Creator and creature, infinite and finite, but my limited, creaturely mind can't begin to comprehend it. It is enough that sovereign God has revealed it to be so. If I could understand Him, He'd not be worth my trust. If I could understand how the Creator can become a creature, how God could become a man, then I could tell myself that He's my size – and then I could search and plot again for ways to escape His eternal and righteous anger against my sin. If I could understand, I wouldn't need to stand in so much awe of Him, wouldn't need to fear Him so, wouldn't need to be so afraid to offend Him – for I'd have His number.

But as it is, He's infinitely far above what my finite mind can comprehend. I can't begin to fathom the weight of His anger, I can't begin to fathom the severity of my predicament before Him..., and I can't begin to fathom how gloriously marvellous it is that He Himself has made His only Son "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption," as the Catechism quotes it from 1

Corinthians 1:30. But this is God, infinite in anger and *infinite in mercy*. He knew we could find no way to escape from under His severe judgment and He knew too that we'd perish under the weight of that judgment once He poured it out upon us. So He in mercy supplied a Mediator, one who was fully human, exactly one of us, of the same human nature as He created us in the beginning, one so much *us* that He was subject to every bitter effect of the fall into sin we struggle with. Yet this Mediator was Himself not sinful, never transgressed God's commands, never built up a debt with God, for He was righteous and so able to withstand the temptations of Satan and the allurements of sin. More, this Mediator God gave was true God, was God's own Son come in the flesh – and so able to handle God's infinite wrath against sin. It's all so marvellous, so wonderfully glorious! This gracious gift of God is our redemption! In His gift of His only Son, the Lord God *provided the way for sinners to escape from under His fearful judgment*. Redemption for the bankrupt: wonderful indeed!

It brings us to our third point:

### 3. The consequence that follows.

We're thankful that the Lord has given deliverance from His righteous judgment through Jesus Christ. But what does gratitude for this deliverance look like?

The question is highly important. The Lord God told Israel that if they would serve Him faithfully, He would bless them abundantly with good crops, peace in the land, etc (Leviticus 26). He also told His people that if they would disobey His decrees He would curse. He would, for example, withhold rain so that the people would have no crop. Or He'd send in the enemy to harass the people. So here's the question we need to grapple with. Would it be OK for Israel to build infrastructure so that when God would withhold rain on account of their sins they would still have water for their animals and crops? That is, should Israel develop and use technology to take the edge off of God's righteous judgment against their sins?

Do not, brothers and sisters, say that God's judgment on sin in this life was something true only for Israel and not for the New Testament dispensation. The book of Revelation repeats that God gives the same sort of judgements on sin in the New Testament era. According to that book of the Bible, sickness (think H1N1 virus or AIDS) can be God's judgment on society's apostasy, as can terrorism or even climate change. Predictably, our culture is developing technology to fight sickness and terrorism and (perceived) climate change. And developing such technology is good; that's part of our mandate to rule over God's world.

But –and this is the fine point of it– we may not use technology as a way to escape the righteous judgement of God! That, too, is Lord's Day 5. In the face of God's judgment on sin, it is tempting and possible to develop technology that takes the edge off the penalty, and makes God's punishment tolerable. But the fact of the matter is, brothers and sisters, that God's heavy hand of judgment will find every sinner sooner or later. Technology is good, and the comfort it brings gives reason for gratitude. But the danger of technology is that *the urgency to repent of sin evaporates*. That's a danger we need very much to be aware of, if only because God's hand continues to press upon those who refuse to repent – for one simply cannot escape God's judgement without the blood of Jesus Christ.

We're modern people, part of a technologically very advanced society. The result is that we live very comfortably, and are the envy of billions around the world. But we remain as sinful as anyone else, and God's righteous judgement on Canada's sins presses upon our society too. Though we've built into our society so many mechanisms to cope with God's hand of judgement, the fact is that no technology will ultimately deliver us. Canadians, as much as any other people on earth, can escape God's judgment only through faith in the Mediator God has sent, Jesus Christ. In our advanced society, it is Christians

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who need to demonstrate what taking God's judgement seriously actually looks like. And that's to say that we're publicly small before God, admit what we deserve, and publicly delight in God's abundant mercy in the gift of His Son for sinners. We'll appreciate technology, but with the increase of technological ability we'll not stop admitting that troubles are upon us because of sin, and so we'll not stop admitting either that Canadians need to repent of sin – and that begins with ourselves.

With gratitude we confess that there's a way to escape the righteous judgment of God in this life and the next, and it's through the blood of God's own Son Jesus Christ – His gift for our salvation. So we'll gratefully concede the consequence: there's nothing we can do to escape God's judgement, not in this life nor in the life to come. So we stand humbly before God with empty hands, and marvel that He gives redemption freely to the humble and the repentant.