

Pre-communion: Christ being strengthened to suffer 

Communion season

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Bible Text: Luke 22:43
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Luke chapter 22 and verse 43. Luke 22 and verse 43.

43 And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.

And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. Our theme this evening is "Christ being strengthened to suffer." Christ being strengthened to suffer. The contents of this text are found only in Luke's gospel. It is a verse to which we have referred in passing on other occasions. It is a verse that when we read it, perhaps tends to baffle us that an angel is here said to strengthen the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed this text was bandied about in the early centuries after the apostles, after the time of the apostles in the debates in the church over the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not a text which perhaps immediately makes sense to us, but it is a very precious text nonetheless.

First of all, I want to consider Christ's identity with his people. Christ's identity with his people. We can consider, first of all, the ministry of angels in general. The angels are created beings but what is their work? What do they do? The scriptures do not tell us all. They do not pander to our curiosity, but they do tell us some things about the work of angels. They worship God. The unfallen angels, those angels that kept their first estate, they worship God whom they love and they rejoice in his works and they execute his will. God uses the angels in the government of the affairs of nations. We know that from the book of Daniel, we know it from the book of Revelation. The angels are intensely interested in God's purpose of salvation as it is unfolded in the earth. The sufferings of Christ, the glory that should follow, these are things that the angels desire to look into.

God employed the angels in revelation. Sometimes they appeared visibly to men, often in human appearance themselves. They were visible when God was giving revelation of himself. We're not to expect angels to be visible now because revelation is completed, the Bible is completed, but they were involved in revelation. We know that they were involved in the giving of the law. Psalm 68, God is among his thousands as on Mount Sinai. Stephen speaks of the Jews having received the law at the disposition of the angels. And the book of Hebrews, and the second chapter likewise speaks of the angels and their

involvement in the giving of the law, "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward," Hebrews 2 and verse 2.

So they were employed in God giving revelation to men. They are also concerned with the church of God on earth. The Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 5 and verse 21 says to Timothy, "I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels." Evidently the angels are interested in the affairs of the church. 1 Corinthians 11:10 says that a woman should not pray or prophesy with her head uncovered because of the angels. Ephesians 3:10 says that God teaches the angels by the church. Ephesians 3:10, to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church, the manifold wisdom of God. God displays his manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers through the church and yet although the angels are spirits, they do not possess physical bodies, yet they minister in physical things. So John 5:4, at the pool of Bethesda, an angel disturbed the water.

So they minister in physical things, though they are spiritual beings but then we're told in Hebrews 1 and verse 14, that the angels, the question is put, are they not ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them who shall be the heirs of salvation? The angels obey God's commands in the interests of the heirs of salvation. In Matthew chapter 18 and verse 10, the Lord Jesus says, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." Now that doesn't say that each child of God has a particular guardian angel, that is forcing the text, but it does indicate that there are angels ready to execute the will of God on behalf of and in the interests of and in the defense of the children of God.

But their ministry is in the physical realm. Psalm 91:11 and 12 which we sang earlier, "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone." They minister, they operate in the interests of the people of God, and whilst not physical beings, they operate in physical things.

The elect angels, the holy angels, the unfallen angels, as opposed to Satan, the devil, and his angels, the holy angels do not interfere with the soul's approach to God through Christ and by the Spirit. They do not interfere with the people of God in their drawing near to God through Christ. The nearest we come to the angels having to do with the soul is perhaps in Luke 16 and verse 22 where Lazarus in the parable died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. As holy beings they know their place before God. As holy beings they do not attempt to move into the province which is not theirs. The people of God draw near to God through Christ and by the enabling of the Holy Spirit and that is not the sphere of angels. We are not to communicate with angels or to worship angels or even to pry into things connected with angels beyond what the scriptures teach.

And the holy angels know their place as creatures before the Creator. So even Michael who is the only archangel mentioned in the scriptures, his name means "who is like unto God," because the holy angels, even the archangel Michael, the highest of them, knows

the infinite difference between the Creator and the creature. Because they are holy, they are not seeking to usurp the place of God.

Now, when we come to the ministry of angels, to Christ, we must remember the person of Christ. Christ was God. Christ became a man without ceasing to be God. As a divine person, he is Lord of the angels. He is the Lord of glory. He commands the legions of angels. But as a man, he was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death though he is now crowned with glory and honor. Psalm 91:11 and 12 which we looked at just now, belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ by right. It belongs to him by right and it belongs to his people in him. The charge of the angels to care for him belongs to him by right and to the people of God in him because they are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. And so the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of Man was ministered to by angels. He was ministered to by angels after the temptations in the wilderness. In Mark chapter 1 and verse 13, "And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him." He rejected the unlawful methods of satisfying his hunger, but the angels subsequently ministered unto him. Evidently they ministered to his physical need. So the Redeemer, as the Redeemer, shared in the ministry of angels with the redeemed. He, the Lord Jesus Christ, was the ultimate true seed of Abraham, in whom all the elect seed, both the elect among the literal seed of Abraham and also the Gentiles who were to be gathered in, it is in this one seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, that all are blessed with the blessings of salvation. And if the angels are ministering spirits to them who shall be the heirs of salvation, so they were also ministering spirits to the Savior himself, because he was truly a man and like the heirs of salvation, the Savior received the ministry of angels. The Lord Jesus Christ was the one of whom the Father said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," but in Isaiah 42:1, it is also written, "Behold my elect whom I uphold, my servant in whom my soul delighteth." He was the Son of the Father, the Son of God, but also the servant of the Lord as the Son of man.

So then Christ received the ministry of angels because he was the Son of man and because he was the Savior of the sons of men but then, secondly, let us consider Christ's humiliation. Christ's humiliation. In our text we read there appeared an angel, an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. Now, in this event, there was an element of encouragement in this angel's ministry. The Father in heaven had not yet left him utterly desolate. He was still in touch; here was a servant from home, as it were. But there was humiliation. This angel comes to support, to strengthen the human frame of the God-man. The Lord Jesus, we call him the God-man because he was God and man, two distinct natures, one person forever, and the one who had the right to command the legions of angels, is here strengthened by one angel, by one of the servants from the Father's house. This entailed humiliation. We can assume that this angel strengthened Christ not by any acting upon the soul of Christ in any direct way, but by supporting his physical frame. He comes to strengthen the servant of Jehovah who was God manifest in the flesh.

There is humiliation here, that one of the servants from the Father's house should strengthen the human frame of God manifest in the flesh but then, thirdly, we have Christ's terrible prospect. Christ's terrible prospect. Why did Christ need this angelic

strengthening of his human frame? Why did his human constitution need the strengthening of an angel from heaven? We have often said that nothing accounts for the agony of Christ in the garden except the fact that he was not only going to suffer physically in the most horrific manner, because many of the people of God by the power of God have faced horrific physical suffering without such agonizing. Nothing accounts for the agony of Christ in the garden but the fact that he was going to suffer the wrath of God, not only in his physical body, but upon his soul. Nothing else accounts for the agony and the sweating of great drops of blood, that he was going to suffer in his soul an anguish compared with which his physical sufferings are but a minor part of his suffering. And it is this anticipation of bearing the wrath of God and the removal of all the comforts of the Spirit upon his soul, this accounts for his anguish. This accounts for the various words used to describe his distress at this time. In Mark's gospel, chapter 14 and verse 33, "And he taketh with him Peter and James and John, and began to be sore amazed," sore amazed, "and to be very heavy; And saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death." He began to be so amazed or appalled and very heavy or oppressed. He felt this awful pressure, this tremendous anguish and burden upon his soul so much so that he says, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death." As he anticipated the wrath of God coming in its unmixed fury and its height on Calvary in the three hours of darkness, he was overwhelmed and amazed and appalled and astonished at that which was before him.

We know that anguish can kill a man. We know that anguish can certainly cause a man to faint physically and pass out. But Christ must do neither. The Lord Jesus Christ was going to suffer an anguish the like of which has never been equaled in this world. Never. But Christ's human frame must not be suffered to sink. His life in this world must not be prematurely snuffed out and crushed out of him before his hour was altogether come. In other words, his human frame must not be shattered by this unparalleled grief as he anticipated the cross. He must live. His sorrow must not be unto death, not now, because the full cup of God's wrath has not yet been drunk by him, the climax of divine vengeance is yet to come, and so he must live, and he must be conscious, and he must be alert, and he must bear it. His holy soul apprehended clearly what was before him. That's why his soul was exceeding sorrowful even unto death. That's why he was appalled and amazed and astonished and aghast because he contemplated a horror that our physical frame in this world is not geared to cope with. But he must live. He must go on living. This anguish of soul must not kill him, not yet. His frame must be supported. He must be conscious. There must be no escape by way of collapse or fainting into unconsciousness, not for the Lord Jesus Christ. He must be alert. He must live on. His human frame must be supported. His human constitution must be held up to bear the weight of the wrath of God.

So this is a supporting of his human constitution in order that it should bear the weight of divine judgment coming down upon it, and that's why he goes on to sweat these great drops of blood because his supported constitution is so supported that the anguish of contemplating what was before him does not bring him to unconsciousness or death. I suppose the nearest parallel in human things is a prisoner kept alive to be judicially executed. He mustn't just die, he must be kept alive and be executed, put to death. But the

Lord Jesus Christ, the punishment he was to bear was vastly greater than anything that this world has ever known. He must be physically upheld to bear an unparalleled anguish. The only other place apart from the cross where God's wrath is poured out in all its unmixed fullness is hell itself. So Christ was strengthened in his human constitution to bear the wages of sin to the full. He was strengthened so that he would get to the cross, so that he would cry out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? He was strengthened to suffer. He must live on. That anguish, which is more than the human constitution could normally bear, must be borne by the strengthened constitution of the Son of man because he must go on living. He mustn't just die in the garden. He must go on living until the time comes when he can say, "It is finished," and bow his head and give up the ghost. What a terrible strengthening this is. What a terrible strengthening. Strengthened not to die until all the waves of the second death have gone over him, and so he took the pains of hell that his people should not.

Now then, is this your Savior? If he's not, then you have no place at his table. But if he is, then he says concerning his supper, he says to his people, "This do in remembrance of me." This do in remembrance of me. There's something strange about those words, in remembrance of me. Do you mean that we're capable of forgetting? And the answer is yes. Yes, we are. Do you remember Israel at the Red Sea, the great deliverance when the Lord opened the waters for them, oh when they were stood with the Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea in front of them, the horror, the distress, the panic beyond belief, the anguish, but then the Lord opened the waters, and they passed through as on dry land and then the waters closed over Pharaoh and his enemies, and they saw the Egyptians on the shore dead. There they sang his praise, but they forgot that the Lord had been their Savior. And we're astonished, we think, how could Israel forget? How could they be in such a jam and see such a deliverance and forget? It doesn't necessarily mean that they forgot the facts but in terms of practical effect, they behaved as if it hadn't happened. And we can forget the agonies of the Son of man. And we do. We do it in practice every time we sin. Every time.

You couldn't remember the sufferings of Christ in their extent, in the divine justice and love displayed in them, you couldn't properly appreciate the immensity of the love of Christ for his people and still sin, could you? Oh yes, we can theoretically, we can theoretically think of the love of Christ and the sufferings of Christ and still sin, but if our souls apprehended it as they ought, how could we sin? Every sin by a Christian entails an under-evaluation of the dying love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every sin, every time we sin, we show the poverty of our appreciation of what Christ did. So of course we need reminding, not because his love is faint. Of course it's not. It's not that the love of Christ, as set forth in scripture, is faint and hard to trace. His love isn't faint, but ours is, and our indwelling sin is so great that our memories grow foggy that when we're tempted to sin, the love of Christ is put to the back of our minds and we sin. Not always, I hope, but we do. To sin we have to esteem sin and you can't esteem sin without disesteeming Christ. Can't be done. Every time we sin, we play down what Christ did. We play down the love of Christ. We say Christ isn't so wonderful, Christ isn't so glorious, Christ's love is not so magnificent, his suffering is not so great that this sin is worth doing without in order to honor and to glorify him. We do need reminding. We do need to increase in

understanding, in apprehension, in appreciation not only of the mind but of our whole soul of the love of Christ for his people, and as we think of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day let us eat and drink praying that we may know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge that we might be filled with all the fullness of God.