

Cruelty of Unbelief & the Victory of Faith

The text of our sermon today is in Matthew 14:1-11. Let's read it together:

“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, 2 And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. 3 For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife. 4 For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her. 5 And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. 6 But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. 7 Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. 8 And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. 9 And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her. 10 And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. 11 And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother” (Matt. 14:1-11).

I've entitled this sermon, ***The Cruelty of Unbelief & the Victory of Faith***

Introduction

In Matthew chapters 11 through 13 we saw the increasing hardness of the unbelieving Jews. Here, in Matthew 14, we see the cruelty of this world. Antichristian religion and antichristian politics join hand in hand against the Lord Jesus Christ and against His people. But He who sits in the heavens shall laugh. He shall have them in derision (Ps. 2:1-4).

I want to consider four lessons from this scripture:

1. First, the conscience of wicked men torments them.
2. Second, outward beauty and worldly skills hide evil within
3. Third, unbelief produces savage cruelty against Christ and His people

4. Fourth, why God's people suffer and the victory of God-given faith

First, The conscience of wicked men torments them

When Herod heard of Jesus and the mighty miracles He did, he jumped to the conclusion that he must be John the Baptist risen from the dead. He hoped to live at peace in his murderous lawlessness. He was wrong. *“Be sure your sin will find you out”* (Num. 32:23). In the same way, in hell, man's conscience will remind him of his willful rejection of Christ and opposition to his own salvation (Rom. 1:18-25; 2:15-16; 2 Tim. 2:25). Romans 2:15 says that men ‘show the work of God's law written on their hearts because their conscience either accuses them or excuses them’ (Rom. 2:15). *“The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD, searching all the inward parts of the belly”* (Prov. 20:27). God uses a man's own conscience as a witness against him, and will prove in the Day of Judgment that his sins were against both light and truth.

Second, Outward beauty and worldly skill hides evil within

Men look on the outward appearance. But God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Our eyes deceive us. Men praise worldly beauty and skill. Men praise knowledge. But they despise and reject Christ. Can anything be more convincing to show that we are not equipped to judge by what we see? Jesus said that ***“...that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God”*** (Luke 16:15).

- *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it”* (Jer. 17:9)?
- God sees man's inward thoughts and motives and He tells it like it is. Jesus said evil comes from man's heart! *“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man”* (Mark 7:21-23).

As outward works mask inward hypocrisy, outward beauty and skill mask inward evil. How often have you heard of a sports star, a politician or a movie star who lived a secret life of utter lawlessness and immorality?

Third, unbelief produces savage cruelty against Christ and His people

A dancing girl proved to be a murderer at heart. Her mother, proved to be a murdering, savage adulteress. And the king was an unjust executioner with no backbone for justice, but with foolish generosity towards senseless women. For all of the pomp and position and pretence of men in this world, God reveals that there is nothing good in man.

Why God's People Suffer and the Victory of Faith

Fourthly, in light of this cruelty to John, we might ask, "Why do God's people suffer?" "Is there any victory in suffering?"

1. First, understand that **God's people suffer because it is the will of God.**
 - a. Isn't it enough to know that? God is good and His will is good. If we trust God, it is great comfort simply to know that His will is always done. Peter said, "*Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator*" (1 Pet. 4:19).
 - b. Everything that happens is by the will of God. But it is the revealed will of God that Christ's people suffer. "*Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake*" (Philippians 1:29).
 - c. God has ordained that believers undergo trials of all kinds to refine their faith. In all suffering, we are "*5 kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold (various) temptations*" (1 Pet. 1:5-6). Trouble does not make us righteous or acceptable before God. Our only righteousness before God is Christ. But trouble serves many other purposes by God's good will. In all trouble we are kept by the power of our wise God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. The suffering of God's people honors God

- a. Let this always be our highest aim: the glory of God in Christ. We should not first think, “What shall I get out of this?” Our first priority, indeed, our greatest delight will ultimately be that Christ is honored in our lives. *“The trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, **might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ**”* (1 Pet. 1:7). Faith honors Christ. He gives it and upholds it. He is all of our confidence and hope. He saves us in our utter unworthiness and weakness (Ex. 14:13). Faith sees. Christ saves.
 - b. It seemed good to God that His Son suffer. *“It (seemed good to -- became) Him (God the Father), for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings”* (Heb. 2:10). Facing the prospect of being made sin and suffering under the wrath of God, Jesus said, *“Thy will be done”* (Matt. 26:42). *“He trusted on the LORD”* (Ps. 22:8). He said, *“What, shall I say, ‘Father save me from this hour?’ But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name!”* (John 12:27-28). He suffered in obedience (Heb. 5:8).
3. Suffering for Christ’s sake is the believer’s highest honor
- a. *“**10** Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **11** Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake”* (Matt. 5:10-11). As one martyr said when facing death, “To die for Christ is an honor I do not deserve.”
 - b. Suffering is the means by which God makes known Himself to His people. For example, by Job’s sufferings, we see that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy. *“Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that **the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy**”* (James 5:11).
 - c. In Peter’s denial we see that Christ upholds the faith of His people and uses all things, even their falls, for their growth in grace, for the good of His Church: *“feed my lambs”* (John 21:15-17) and for His glory.

- d. Paul said he sought three times to be delivered from his thorn in the flesh. But the Lord “**9 said...**, ***My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong***” (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Paul was not sadistic or suicidal. He was happy to suffer for Christ’s sake and for the sake of His people. Christ was His life (Gal. 2:20). He wanted to do His will. He wanted the power of Christ to rest on him that he might overcome every enemy (Rev. 12:11; Rom. 6:14; 7:24-25).
- e. Hezekiah learned God’s love in Christ by his suffering. He was sick and near death. But when the LORD healed him, He said, “*Behold, for peace I had great bitterness*”. His sickness became bitterness to his soul. But God’s revelation of His eternal, unchanging love of God in Christ, became His joy and assurance. He saw that it was the love of God that moved Him to make His Son an offering for the sins of His people, and that moved Christ to bear His people’s sins (1 Pet. 2:24). Hezekiah said, “***Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back***” (Isaiah 38:17).
4. Suffering prepares us for service here and for glory hereafter
- a. “*We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; 4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope: 5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us*” (Rom. 5:3-5). We do not glory in trouble as an end in itself, but we glory on account of trouble, because trouble produces...
- i. **Patience.** Patience is constancy; it is continuance in faith. It is standing under the truth of the Gospel. Patience is perseverance in the truth of the Gospel by faith in Christ. Through trouble, we repeatedly and with increasing trust Christ more and more as everything in our salvation. We are humbled at the sight of

our sinfulness, our unworthiness, our unbelief, our weakness, and our seeming lack of growth to do the will of God. But these drive us to see with clearer persuasion that Christ is our all before God (Gal. 2:20; 5:5). He is the propitiation for our sins. He is our righteousness. He justified us by His blood. He made us holy. He perfected us before God. No, we do not see these things *in ourselves*. But by faith we see them in our covenant Mediator. Patience obeys God under proving trials. Remember Abraham? Some 25 years after God said, “*I have made thee a father of many nations,*” Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the son of promise. Abraham endured the doubts and temptations and yes, even falls, but through all of it he was “*fully persuaded that what God had promised, He was able also to perform*” (Rom. 4:21). When God told him to offer up Isaac, Abraham understood that because God had promised eternal salvation to him and to all of God’s elect in Christ (Gal. 3:16-19), and because Christ must come through Isaac, therefore God must raise Isaac from the dead if he required him to take his own son’s life. By faith, when he was tried, Abraham offered up Isaac...” (Heb. 11:17). His faith proved genuine.

- ii. Patience produces **Experience**. “Experience” means the proving of faith. Patience in faith under suffering proves God’s faithfulness: He is faithful to uphold our faith in Christ. Believers may be helpless and confused, but they will cry (Ps. 34:17, the righteous cry). And when they cannot cry, God’s Spirit will make intercession for them (Rom. 8:26). And our patience in suffering proves the genuineness of our faith. In every trial we appeal to Christ as our His righteousness and look again to the cross. Naomi proved Ruth. Would Ruth return to her gods? Ruth replied to her as every believer says to Christ, “*16 Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy*

God my God: 17 Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me” (Ruth 1:16-17). Jesus tried His disciples. He told them that only His obedience unto death was their life and living before God. Some were offended by this and left. He asked the twelve, “Will you also depart?” Peter passed the test: “***To whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. 69 And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God***” (John 6:69). Thus, suffering produces an ever-increasing steadfastness in faith. This steadfastness enables us -- by the grace of God -- even to die for Christ (Rev. 12:11; Dan. 3:15-18; 24-25).

- iii. Trouble produces patience, patience produces proving by experience, and **Hope** does not leave us ashamed in disappointment. Hope is confident expectation of eternal glory. Because our eternal glory is by Christ’s obedience alone, it is sure. God considers eternal glory to be an appropriate reward, considering all Christ accomplished for His people (Illus: appropriate amount?) God looks at Him and says to us: “Eternal glory with Christ is the only appropriate reward.” Eternal life is the gift of God on the ground of Christ’s righteousness (Rom. 6:23). It is never because of anything in us. It is especially not for our obedience or our faithfulness. All is ours on one ground only: because Christ obtained all for us as covenant Husband. He prayed to His Father, “***the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one***” (John 17:22). Christ and His people are one. He is the head; they are His body. What was theirs became His. What is His is now theirs (2 Cor. 5:21).
- b. Believers are victorious in suffering. They do not merely endure trouble. They are “*more than conquerors through Him that loved them*” (Rom. 8:37). Maybe you have endured conflict and won. But if you lost property or a job or were injured, the win may have been a

net loss. But because Christ did all for His people in their place and on their behalf, they not only win, but they are more greatly benefitted than if they never suffered. Think of the large scale conflict: we gained more in Christ than we ever lost in Adam. This principle is seen throughout scripture. *“If (we are) children, then (we are) heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. 18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”* (Rom. 8:17-18). There is no comparison. Eternal glory is infinite in its blessings and in its duration. What comparison can temporal sufferings have to eternity with Christ?

- c. Believers find Christ’s throne to be their sanctuary in sufferings. In Psalm 73 the Psalmist was in turmoil of soul when he saw the prosperity of the wicked; they seemed to have no problems. In Psalm 73:17 he says, *“Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.”* The sanctuary of every believer is Christ enthroned in glory. He has obtained our eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12; 1:3; Jer. 17:12). The Psalmist was confused. He was hungry to hear from God. He wanted deliverance. He had stumbled by looking at the prosperity of the wicked. His forward progress was in retreat. But when He looked again to Christ on His throne, having conquered all, He learned that the victory of His Deliverer was his victory! His victory is in His Victor! His triumph is Christ’s triumph! The sanctuary of rest and assurance and sure blessing is the throne of Christ! He died and rose and now reigns and intercedes for me (Rom. 8:34)! What I did by sinning was laid on Him. He bore it. He answered for it. What He obtained, He obtained for His people given Him in eternal election (Jn. 17:22; Eph. 1:3-4). He did all on their behalf and in their place. All God gives to Him, is given to them with Him, because they are one with Him (Rom. 8:32; John 17:22). Believers have nothing short of eternal glory with Christ! Later in the same Psalm, he prays, *“22 So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a*

beast before thee. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. 24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee” (Psalm 73:22-25)

5. Suffering furthers the kingdom of God and the ministry of the Gospel in this world for the elect’s sake (Jer. 26:12-15).

- a. Paul was bound in prison. In his affliction he said, ***“I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory”*** (2 Tim. 2:10).

Ultimately, the sufferings of Christ’s people benefit the Church of God. Remember Stephen? The believers were scattered because of his death, and the Gospel was spread. The Church grew. His death benefitted the Church. Remember Joseph? Joseph’s sufferings, which his brothers inflicted with evil intent, were ordained by God for their salvation. Paul said to the Thessalonians, *“What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy.”* (1 Thess. 2:19-20). No earthly trouble was too great for Paul, that he might see Christ’s people inherit eternal glory in the presence of Christ!

6. Our suffering is fellowship with Christ in His sufferings

- a. Christ suffers all that His people suffer. This is difficult for us to grasp. Saul persecuted Christians to death. Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and said, *“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me”* (Acts 9:4)?! Our Lord said that what Paul did to believers, he did to Him. Jesus said that in the Day of Judgment He will say to those on His right hand, *“Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me”* (Matt. 25:40). God says to His elect, *“He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of [my] eye”* (Zech. 2:8). And Paul said that by his own sufferings he filled up the sufferings of Christ for the Church. I *“rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church”* (Col. 1:24).

- b. When sailors on the same ship suffer together, it creates a bond between them. Christ and His people suffer as one. This creates a bond between us. Sin becomes odious; Christ becomes precious (1 Pet. 1:7; 4:1-2).
7. Suffering assures us of God's love
- a. God chastises only those He loves. "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten*" (Rev. 3:19). Troubles are gentle chastisements that make known the tender love of our heavenly Father. There is no sweeter time than when we are at our own wits end, when we see no escape, we cry to the Lord in our trouble, and He delivers us for His name's sake. Psalm 107 repeatedly calls to the redeemed, "*O, that men would praise the LORD for His goodness, for His marvelous works unto the children of men!*"
8. Suffering will be our entrance to glory, our triumph and victory with Christ
- a. Peter says in 1 Pet. 5:10-11, "*But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. **11** To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen*" (1 Pet. 5:10-11). Paul reminds the Philippians, "*For me to live is Christ; but to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21).

By these things we ought to be immeasurably comforted. We ought to have the greatest confidence and assurance that "*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to His purpose*" (Rom. 8:28). As Job, "*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him*" (Job 13:15)!

Let us marvel at this unsurpassingly glorious truth: The triumph of Christ is our triumph. His victory is ours. His reward is our inheritance with Him. Nothing happens to one for whom Christ died that is not His burden. All Christ is and has belongs to His people with Him (Rom. 8:32; Jn. 17:22). Let us therefore glory by our triumph in Christ in all of our afflictions! We are, by faith, at this time "*more than conquerors through Him that loved us!*" (Rom. 8:37).