

Sermon for April 2, 2015 – Maundy Thursday

Hebrew 5:7-9 (NIV84)

⁷ *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.* ⁸ *Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered* ⁹ *and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*

Even at a distance he could be heard lamenting: crying out loud prayers to God. He begged and pleaded with the LORD to change the inevitable. The LORD can do anything, right? So why not take his suffering away? His loud cries and tearful whimpering revealed the anguish of his heart to such a degree that it would have been hard not to feel sympathy for this man agonizing in prayer.

Who is this person and why is he offering up such bitter tears? Is he a man struggling with stage four cancer? Is he a parent whose child is dying? Is he a teenager, struggling with all sorts of issues that no one seems to understand? Is he someone overwhelmed with guilt because of some sin he committed which cost him both his job and family? This man could be anyone of those people, but he isn't. Truth be told, he probably would be the last person you would ever expect agonizing in prayer.

Who is he? He is Jesus, your Savior, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his crucifixion. And what a comfort it is to know this!

“A comfort?” you might ask, “How can the anguish Jesus felt in the garden of Gethsemane be a comfort?” Because His suffering shows us that Jesus didn't just dispassionately go through His work of saving us – not feeling any real anxiety. No, Jesus truly felt the burden of our sin. He truly felt the anguish of facing God's wrath. Our great Savior could have stopped it all, but He didn't. Even though the thought of suffering and death went against his very nature, he willingly endured it.

Just think: not only do we have a Messiah who saved us from sin, but we have one who was tempted and troubled in every way – just like we are. We have a Christ who can most certainly sympathize with us in our weaknesses because he experienced many of them himself. Let us consider these things under the theme: **Jesus is our sympathetic High Priest.** *He willingly drank the cup of suffering, so that He might fill our cup with blessing.*

Our sermon text is from a portion of the book of Hebrews that explains why Jesus is our great High priest. He was appointed by God the Father before the creation of the world to be subjected to weakness in order that He might offer up the perfect sacrifice needed to atone for our sins. We will meditate on Jesus' sacrifice tomorrow. Today we want to consider the weakness to which God subjected Jesus, because of which we are saved.

And what is the weakness to which Jesus was subjected? The horror of our sin and the absolute terrible punishment we deserve because of it.

Those who spend time meditating on God's law know how gut wrenching the guilt of sin is. The thought of suffering in hell terrifies us. To experience nothing but pain and have God turn his back on us forever – who can endure such thoughts? We certainly can't! This is why people are so quick to change the subject when you bring it up. They would rather talk about anything other than this – especially when confronted with the fact that they, according to Scripture, deserve such a fate. No, we don't want to hear about sin,

death and hell at all! Keep bringing these things up and people will start lashing out against God – claiming that they simply can't believe He would be so intolerant and wrathful. They don't want to face the truth about God's holiness and their sin.

Now if the thought of suffering, death and hell terrifies sinners like us, just imagine how abhorrent it would be for the sinless Son of God who did nothing to deserve such things and yet had to face them for our sake! Jesus is perfectly holy. Sin repulses him more than water repels oil. And yet, for our salvation's sake, God supernaturally imputed all our sins to Jesus – as Isaiah prophesied: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*ⁱ

This is the weakness to which God the Father subjected his Son: He made him who perfectly resisted and abhorred sin to carry all the sins of mankind to such a degree that he appeared as if he were sin personified. And with all that sin came punishment: being separated from God and all his goodness – suffering the full force of God's righteous wrath! This was the cup of suffering the Father handed His Son to drink.

And Jesus really did suffer – not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. Our sermon text says: *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.* This verse is most definitely referring to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus said to His disciples: *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."*ⁱⁱ The repulsiveness of sin imputed to his holy nature and the knowledge of the great suffering He would have to endure, gave him such anguish that, as he prayed, *his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*ⁱⁱⁱ

And what did Jesus pray? That the LORD would take His suffering away. The thought of his cross terrified Him as much as the thought of hell terrifies us. Make no mistake, Jesus truly desired our salvation, and in all His anguish He did not sin. But here we see Jesus subjected to such weakness that God had to send an angel to strengthen Him. Here we see the Merciful One crying out for mercy. *"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."*^{iv}

What effect did Jesus' prayer have on His Father? Our text says: *he was heard because of his reverent submission.* But how was Jesus heard? He still suffered and died, didn't he? What does it mean that God heard his prayer?

It means that God answered Jesus' petition, *"not what I will, but what you will."* God strengthened Jesus so that He could continue submitting himself to His Father's plan - even though the mere thought of His suffering caused him great anguish. Jesus certainly knew that His Father could change things - that He could even save the world without having to suffer, if it were God's will. But this was not His heavenly Father's plan.

And when, after His hours of prayer, it remained clear that it was God's will for Him to drink the cup of suffering ordained for Him from before the world began, Jesus didn't complain or cry out, "God, why aren't you doing what I ask! Don't you love me?" No. Rather, trusting in His Father's love and plan for our salvation, Jesus got up, faced Judas, rebuked Peter for trying to prevent His arrest, and resolutely went with the mob in order to take up the cross He abhorred.

And what was the result of Jesus' determination to carry out His Father's plan for our salvation? Our text says: *Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.* In other words, even though Jesus is the true Son of God, He, through his suffering, learned to submit to His Father's will. This obedience was an integral part of how He won our righteousness.

God demands perfect submission and obedience from us. We, however, continually fail in this regard, and are not righteous before God. But Jesus perfectly submitted to and obeyed God in everything – even when

that meant carrying the sin he abhorred and suffering the punishment He in no way deserved. Jesus did this for us – not merely to pay for our sins, but also to offer us the perfect record of obedience and righteousness we need to stand before God; a record He imputes to us through faith.

Our text continues: *And once made perfect* – that is to say, once Jesus' obedience to His Father's will was 100% complete - *He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*. This is to say: Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who believe in him and, as a result of this salvation, gladly obey all the things Jesus commands for our good.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you see how Jesus is our great, sympathetic High Priest? He willingly drank the cup of suffering his Father ordained for him in order to win our salvation. Because of His obedience, we are declared righteous in God's sight. Because of His cross we stand forgiven. Jesus knows the temptations, pressures and anguish we face on this earth – having faced many of them Himself. He most certainly sympathizes with us in our weakness. More importantly, however, He can offer us the forgiveness, life and salvation we so desperately need.

And where does Jesus offer us these blessings? He offers them to us through His Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

In a short while we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Just think of what this special meal gives us. Through it, God forgives our sins, strengthens our faith and reassures us that we are His dearly loved children who never have to drink the cup of God's wrath.

Why not? Because, as we partake of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, we enter into a special communion with Christ. In this meal we receive His very body and blood. In other words, the bread and wine are not just symbols of our redemption; they, at Christ's command, carry to us our very Redeemer himself. As we eat and drink this sacrament, our great High Priest comes to make His home in and with us in order that he might pour out upon our hearts the forgiveness, life and salvation He won through His cross.

Think about the peace, love and all the wonderful blessings God offers on the plate and in the cup of communion. These blessings are ours to receive and enjoy – all because of Christ's work for us: all because He submitted to His Father's will and drank the cup of suffering that we deserved. Rejoice in this salvation and, in response to it, show your thanks to the LORD by willingly obeying His good and gracious will recorded in Scripture. Christ's commands are not meant to burden or harm, but to strengthen, protect and bless you throughout your journey on this sin cursed earth, and bring you safely home to heaven. Amen.

ⁱ Isa 53:6 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Mar 14:34 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Luk 22:44 NIV84

^{iv} Mar 14:36 NIV84