

Perfect through Suffering

In the name of him for whom and by whom all things exist, dear friends in Christ: In many and various ways, God spoke to his people of old by the prophets; but now in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. You know those words. They are the first verse of the book of Hebrews, from which today's Epistle is taken. The passage we read is actually expanding on the idea expressed in that statement. All that the Lord communicated through the prophets and other heavenly messengers proved to be trustworthy. There was strength in the words; and they governed life and death. People who lived by the Word of the Lord and walked in his ways were rewarded. The favor of the Lord rested upon them. People who violated God's commands were punished as the Law decreed. The point being the words delivered through the messengers were vitally important. You did well to listen and adhere to them.

That being the case, how much more should we be paying close attention to the words the Lord delivered to us in person through Jesus the eternal Son? Jesus who is the Word made flesh? Jesus who alone is the Way the Truth and the Life? The writer asks rhetorically, if we're not going to listen to him, if we drift away from what he taught, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation as the one he prepared for us and delivers to us by his word? The obvious answer is that we can't hope to escape. We can only expect righteous wrath and condemnation. So, when the Lord speaks, when his Word is being taught, you best sit up, lean forward, and pay close attention.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to expand on what the great salvation Jesus gives us entails. A common misconception is that the Christian hope is to die and go to heaven, there to spend endless ages in luxurious delight – sort of like being a passenger on a pleasure cruise that never ends. But that is not the future the Lord has in store for those redeemed by Christ. No, we are looking forward to the resurrection of our bodies, the recreation of all things, and being given absolute dominion over the world and the age to come. Just as our first parents were appointed by God to be the lords and masters of all that he had made, so those who trust in Christ will be given dominion over the perfected recreation.

That's what the author means where he says, "It was not to angels that God subjected the world to come." Then, quoting from the 8th psalm, he testifies, "What is man that you are mindful of him? ... You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet."

You see, in the original order of things, the human race was given the highest place under God himself. Even the angels were subject to humans. I suspect that this is what caused Satan's fall. He was appointed a guardian for our first parents in Eden. Apparently he chafed at the idea of being a more powerful creature but lower in the scheme of things, so he conspired to bring mankind down by tempting them into sin. Because he succeeded and we fell from our appointed place, for the time being the heavenly angels do rank higher than us. But in the recreation, that will be reversed. We will be restored to our proper place – one of honor and glory.

We don't see it at the present; but the author continues, "We [do] see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

The thought is this: when the eternal Son took on his humanity, becoming our brother in flesh, he also joined us in the consequences of our fallen state. Though without sin himself, he became subject to the curse and all the aches, pains, and sorrows it entails. Indeed, in his suffering and death on the cross, he became the sole subject of God's curse due to sin. On him was poured out the entire judgment of God against all of us so that he tasted the death of damnation we deserve, effectively swallowing it all up.

His resurrection proves that. That he lives after dying for all sin shows that the debt of all sin has been paid. And that he has since ascended to his former place in glory in his divinity and now also in his humanity is proof that we too will be restored to glory in the new creation.

But then the writer goes on to reveal a remarkable mystery. He says, "It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." Did you catch that? Jesus was made perfect through his suffering. Well, wasn't he perfect already? In a moral sense, yes. The perfection mentioned here has more to do with the idea of completeness. There was a sense in which the Son of God was incomplete, namely with respect to his love. His love was not complete.

Let me explain: perfect love is the love the Father has for the Son. It consists in the Father giving of himself, that divine essence that makes God God, all of it, so that the Son is. We call it the Father's eternal begetting of the Son. It's always going on; always has, always will. The Father gives himself for the Son so that they two share the same divine essence. Together from them proceeds the Holy Spirit so that they are three persons sharing the one divine essence. But that's another matter.

We want to concentrate on the love between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son by giving himself. The Son expresses his love for the Father in submitting to the Father's will. It's a different kind of love; not the giving of self, but the surrender of will. The Father's will is that the Son's love be made perfect like his own, which happens when he gives himself to suffering on the cross in order to redeem fallen mankind. In giving himself entirely, his love reflects exactly that of the Father, and so it is made perfectly complete.

In light of today's other readings, especially the Old Testament lesson, we see that God our heavenly Father has arranged things for the purpose of perfecting our love also. Adam, the first man, is formed from the dust of the earth. He becomes of living being when the Lord breathes a spirit into him. But he's incomplete. "It's not good for the man to be alone" the Lord declares. But rather than form a mate for him in the same way he made Adam, he does it in a way that reflects his own being. As the Father gives himself for the Son, so Adam is caused to give of himself for his bride. And as the Father and Son are two persons in one divine essence, so the Man and the Woman become two persons in one flesh.

Obviously, the man gives less of himself than the Father does for the Son; but then, his love is expressed to her not just in her creation, which cost him a rib, but also in his ongoing giving of himself for her, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her." A man's love for his wife is to be one of self denial. His focus is to be what's good for her no matter what it costs him. It involves patience, kindness, forbearance, forgiveness, and yes, suffering. And by such suffering his love is being made perfect.

On the flip side, a woman's love for her husband is to be like that of the Son's for the Father, as Paul also says to the Ephesians, "Wives, submit to your own husbands as the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the Church, his body, and is himself its Savior." He is to give self, she is to surrender will, so that the two become and remain one.

Continuing the thought, a wife's love is made perfect – like that of the Father – in her giving of herself for her children. It is she who carries the infant while it is being formed in her womb. It is she who bears the pain of labor. And it is she who continues to give of herself long after the baby is born. Raising a child is the source of immense suffering, and in general, it's a burden that though shared by parents, usually falls more heavily on mom than dad. But again, God's purpose in this suffering is that our love be perfected.

This speaks directly to us. A good deal of popular American Christianity is about how God wants to have your best life now; nothing but health, happiness, and success. We as a people and a culture seek to avoid conflict, pain, and suffering of all kinds. We want to pursue our own pleasures. And for that very reason, we see more and more that people are rejecting the goodness of family life as God designed it. Rates of marriage in our society have tumbled. Rates of divorce have increased. People who do marry are doing it later and later in life. Couples are having fewer and fewer children – if they choose to have any at all. They ask questions like, "Do we get a dog and ruin the carpet, or should we have a child and ruin our lives?" Along the same line, I hear many young people firmly declaring, "I'm never going to have any kids when I grow up." But you see what it is: it's selfishness. It's the very opposite of what God made us for. And it seeks to avoid the very institutions and vocations that God gave us by which to perfect our love.

Jesus strongly endorses marriage. He wants men and women to commit themselves to each other in godly love and to remain steadfast to their sacred vows for their whole lives. And Jesus loves children. He takes them up in his arms and blesses them. Marriage and family are good gifts by which the Lord fulfills our deepest needs, provides our greatest satisfactions, and by which he perfects us. Let me suggest that we as his people, redeemed by his sacrifice, should value what he values, and seek to embrace and to promote what he honors in every way we can.

And now by way of a disclaimer, I am fully aware that not everyone marries; some because they are not so inclined, and others because though open to the possibility they have not found a suitable spouse. Others are divorced – many against their will. I am also painfully aware that not every married couple is able to produce children. The family life I've been describing as God's primary means for perfecting our love is the norm for most people, but there are exceptions. Those who do not marry are free to find other avenues to express love in self sacrificial giving and service. And those couples that cannot bear children have other opportunities to deny themselves and serve. Such avenues and opportunities abound in this present fallen world. The point is that we need to pursue them, for by so doing, God is perfecting our love through what we suffer in the service of others.

And as we do, we remember the Lord's promise: that after we have suffered a little while in our state of sin and imperfection, lower than the angels, he will in his good timing raise us up with Christ, crown us with glory and honor, and put all things in subjection under our feet. May he complete this work in us. And to him be all our praise and thanks now and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!