

The Tribulation and Comfort of the Righteous

Psalm 77:7-14,

Oculi Sunday, March 8, 2015

Beloved of the Lord.....Most of us are familiar with the hymn, “What a Friend we Have in Jesus.” The author of this hymn is Joseph Scriven. He lived from 1820 to 1886. When Joseph Scriven was a young man, he moved from Ireland to Canada. There he met a young Christian woman, and they were engaged. As they were both sincere Christians, they planned their life together and agreed never to quarrel or give room to anger in their hearts. If they failed and did become angry, they would kneel and pray until the anger had passed. There was a great tragedy however. The woman was riding in a boat which capsized in a storm and she drown. She perished just one day before their wedding. After hearing the news Joseph Scriven was crushed with sorrow. In the midst of such bitter grief however he remember their agreement to pray. He knelt down and prayed God would give him the strength to bear the cross. “After three hours of prayer he arose calm and strengthened, for he had learned to say: ‘Thy will be done.’” (The Church Through the Ages, Roth and Kramer, CPH, 1949, pg. 455) It wasn’t long after this his mother went through great grief and sorrow by way of a different trial. In order to comfort her, Joseph Scriven wrote the hymn, “What a Friend we Have in Jesus.” By such trials and tribulations God blessed this man so that he could comfort others with the love of Jesus.

Knowing all this we might ask the question, “Would we have that hymn today, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, if God did not allow Mr. Scriven to go through such trials?” Indeed, as bad as the loss of his bride was, hasn’t God through this hymn provided almost endless comfort to hundreds of thousands of Christians since that time? And doesn’t this one example prove the truth of God’s Word in Isaiah 55.....”For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Regarding then our trials and tribulations today, or the cross God gives us to bear, let us remember God has given us this cross for a good purpose, to increase our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus, who is our dearest friend. Hebrews twelve says that God allows our chastening “for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” Whatever our trials may be, let us pray as Joseph Scriven did, that God will give us the strength to bear the cross. “Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a Friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness – Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

I. Our struggles when we are in the midst of affliction. Psalm 77, our text today, is a psalm of Asaph. Asaph lived at the time of King David, and Asaph was one of the directors of the Temple-chorus at the time of David. Asaph was gifted with musical talent, and poetic ability. It is obvious from our text, Asaph had been through many trials and tribulations, days of sadness and grief. He writes what all Christians go through

sooner or later, that feeling that God has abandon or forsaken them. “Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever?”

Now first, briefly, let us understand there are times God truly does forsake or leave a person, but this is when man forsakes God first, by unbelief. Therefore when the Christian not only yields to sin and temptation, but the heart becomes hardened and impenitent regarding the sin, such is a person who has fallen from grace by unbelief. In the heart of that person who has truly fallen away, they stubbornly are continuing in a sin they know they should not do, and their heart is hardened like a stone rather than broken and sorry. This is a heart that knows not how to pray “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Such a person justifies their evil work and defends the evil done, rather than confessing and forsaking it. The Holy Spirit cannot live and remain in that impenitent heart, which refuses to bow before God and be sorry for all that has been done. Keep in mind they may still say they love Jesus and believe in forgiveness and all that, but really by their continuance in the sin and stubborn refusal to repent, they have forsaken God by unbelief. When a Christian falls away, always remember they forsake God first, and God in answer then forsakes them due to their own unbelief.

Now in the case of Asaph and our psalm, we are not speaking of an impenitent unbeliever whom God has forsaken, but we are speaking of a struggling Christian who feels as though God has forsaken them. This is a Christian who is wrestling with doubts within. Their heart is not a stone, but they are trembling within and are fearful of God. It is by everything that is happening to them in their life, they experience that most broken feeling that God has left them because of all they suffer. When Joseph Scriven, for example, lost the dear woman he was about to marry, no doubt he wrestled with that feeling, that God had forsaken him! Where was God’s mercy in all this? Why did God do this? Why did God allow it? Why did God take her away? Likewise how is this any different from Mary and Martha in our Gospel reading? They sent for Jesus, they prayed Jesus would come and heal dying Lazarus, but Jesus didn’t come, and Jesus didn’t heal and Lazarus died. He died though the Bible very clearly says, “Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus”. Like Joseph Scriven, Mary and Martha must have wrestled with doubts and struggled with feeling forsaken. It is at those darkest times, when we are dealing with death, that God appears to very distant and not near. He has withdrawn himself, or so we feel. There are few feelings worse than helplessness, and once you get there all you can do is pray. When Joseph Scriven lost his bride, he too was utterly helpless, and all he could do was pray. Yet in prayer God strengthened Joseph, and in prayer the Holy Spirit within reminding Joseph to pray for strength, and so He did, and so he was strengthened.

You and I today have the luxury of seeing the fruit of the trial regarding Joseph Scriven, Mary and Martha. By way of trial God produced the good fruit on that blessed hymn which still strengthens Christians today, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Likewise we know the fruit of the trial with Mary and Martha, for Jesus allowed Lazarus to be sick and die, only so Jesus would raise him from the dead! The fruit of that trial and miracle is so rich and abundant you could write hundreds of sermons and it still would not be enough. Christ has conquered death, Christ can raise us from the dead by the

power of His Word, “Because I live ye shall live also”, and hasn’t death lost its sting? But it is enough for us to understand today, when God gives you those heavy trials, you need to stop and pray, and above all things learn better to pray “Lord thy will be done.” Remember also what Jesus said when His disciples told Him Lazarus was dying, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.” In like manner your trial, this cross which God Himself has given you, is given for the glory of God. And if you accept it in faith, believing, the Son of God likewise will be glorified.

II. Remember His wonderful acts of deliverance! This brings us back to Asaph and his meditating upon God’s Word. We see there is somewhat a turn in his thinking. You might say he wakes up from those depressing thoughts of being forsaken and he comes to certain conclusions. Namely, “Could God take away His grace or fail in one promise? Would God ever shut up His heart from me so as to not give me His tender mercies? God forbid!” And so in the second half of our reading Asaph is on the rebound, confidently on the other side of the trial, namely recovering, confidence, and strength. He is like Joseph Scriven who after prayer is able to stand and arise and continue on. Asaph now concludes, “This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High.” By the words, “This is my infirmity”, there is acceptance in his condition, acceptance of God’s will. His thoughts return to the Right hand of the Most High, which is Jesus Christ. How many years has the Right Hand of God been led him and guided him? Will this Friend of Sinners fail him now? God forbid! Or as Scriven said, What a Friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer!

Having faith in God Asaph now meditates and prays “I will remember the works of the Lord, surely I will remember thy wonder of old.” Asaph now remembers God’s mighty works of deliverance therefore Asaph knows God will deliver him likewise. God delivered the children of Israel by the Ten Plagues upon wicked Pharaoh. God had heard the cry of His people, and God answered. God took the Children of Israel by the hand and parted the Red Sea before them. This wasn’t a shallow Sea of Reeds, as some Bible maps indicate, but Exodus 14:29 says, “But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.” They looked up at that towering wall of water above them, for God had prepared their path, but Pharaoh and his hosts were drown in the sea. So God will likewise take vengeance upon our enemies in His own good time, and yet we in Christian love pray for their repentance, before its too late. Likewise consider how God delivered Daniel from the lions, or David from Saul, or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, from the fiery furnace. Though these miracles took place long ago, they still have great value for us today, for they teach us that God is not only watching from above, but He has a gracious and active role in our life. He is not only the Good Shepherd who leads us to green pastures, but He is also a Man of War who guards and protects His children. Even Satan is helpless before Christ our Shield. Whatever the trial, whatever the temptation, whatever the cross, let us then happily accept it for God’s glory. Your life is not about your glory. Your life is about God’s glory, therefore “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”

Finally beloved of the Lord, do not forget that great cross that your dear Christ carried for you. You were in His heart, you were on His mind, when He took the burden of your sins upon Himself. There at the cross is a much more mighty work than all the miracles of the Old and New Testaments combined, for there upon the cross the Son of God gave His life as a ransom and payment for your soul, and all the souls of the world. What work of God or man compares to this? This is the miracle whereby Jesus saved all people, but only those who believe can receive. Therefore in every trial, may our prayer be the same as Asaph who prayed "I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings. Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary: who is so great a God as our God? Thou art the God that doest wonders: thou hast declared thy strength among the people." When we accept His trial, when we bear our cross, we likewise declare His strength among the people. And after grief and sorrow and prayer, let us likewise arise, rejoicing the Lord has counted us worthy of giving us a cross to bear for His name. Amen.