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The GOSPEL **St. Matthew 8:23–27 (NKJV)**

Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

But He said to them, “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, “Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?”

The Collect

Almighty God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright, grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Elihu is more conciliatory in his rebuke of Job, being, for example, the only one of the “friends” who addresses him by name and acknowledging his own limitation and sinfulness. At the same time, he claims for his words purity and righteousness because he believes God is the source of his counsel for Job. Elihu chides Job for contending with God, who gives no accounting of any of His words (see verse 13).

But the Word of God is not unknowable, and God stands by His Word. The psalmist writes, “The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant” (25:14). “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

It is with the confidence and humility towards the whole counsel of God that faithful preachers today do their work, trusting in the truth and power of the Scriptures. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31).

Even though Job had done many righteous works before God, he was still suffering. Good works done in faith do not save us from suffering in this life. Job was a “good” man but he was still a sinner. “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7-9).

In our own tribulations we still must trust not in our own worthiness, but in God’s mercy, which is revealed in Christ’s bloody death on a cross and glorious resurrection. It is only in Christ that we are thereby strengthened to remain steadfast in true faith, trusting that we too will ultimately see our Redeemer with our own eyes, even during the greatest suffering.

Through Jesus’ blood and merit I am at peace with God;
 What, then, can daunt my spirit, however dark my road?
 My courage shall not fail me, for God is on my side;
 Though hell itself assail me, its rage I may deride. (TLH 372:1)

Lesson from the Book of Concord The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

VII.

Also they teach, that One holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” etc. [Eph. 4:5, 6]

VIII.

Although the Church properly is the Congregation of Saints and true believers, nevertheless, since, in this life, many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use the Sacraments, which are administered by evil men; according to the saying of Christ: “The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,” etc. [Matt. 23:2]. But the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men.

They condemn the Donatists and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.

—The Augsburg Confession

We must never forget when reading the Old Testament prophets that the ultimate fulfillment of their prophecies is Christ. “The day of the Lord” is Christ’s coming. And the people of Jerusalem (the remnant) are the Church. We note here that after the suffering of the Church the Lord comes and fights for His people. Jesus stands on the Mount of Olives (the same place He ascended from) and brings warfare to His enemies, and blessings to His Church. “Living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea.”

Just like with the plagues of Egypt in Moses’ day the Lord strikes His enemies with plagues. The Feast of Tabernacles is a very appropriate image for the ingathering of the nations to receive their reward. It was an autumn harvest festival, and it commemorated the interim time just before entering into the Promised Land. It works well as imagery for the Church as the gathering place for the saints before receiving their final inheritance.

Though some will still reject Him and madly fight against Him, He shall sweep them away and give all His gifts to His faithful servants. We must remember, especially in our day, not to grow weary in our faith. We cannot let the godless cause us to lose heart. We must remain steadfast though the world goes from bad to worse. Our Lord is the Victor, and so are we, when we are in Him.

In the steely grip of affliction, cast down in the mire, Job grew desperate as his pleas for mercy seemed to be unanswered. Job was convinced God was being wrathful. Luther wrote that if we believe God to be wrathful, “this is to imagine another god and not to remain in the simplicity of faith that there is one God. Nor is God cruel, but He is ‘the Father of comfort.’ Because He delays His help, our hearts make a wrathful idol of God, who is always like Himself and constant” (AE 12:374).

Far from being cruel, God is molding us for His loving service. “The fiercer our sufferings are, the greater and more wonderful are the things that are worked in the saints. It is a proof of grace and God’s goodwill when they are disciplined by the cross and afflictions” (AE 6:355). When we find ourselves in distress, we do well to remember that God may have “enrolled” us for lessons in compassion. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer” (2 Corinthians 1:3-6).

“Laugh at me all you want,” Job seems to say. “Taunt and mock me, but let me speak my piece first. Why is it that the wicked prosper while I have to suffer so terribly?” On top of the ghastly all-pervading pain and loss he is enduring, Job is wrenched by the seeming unfairness of life. But he goes on in verse 26 to say that all men, regardless of their life circumstances, whether in pain and misery or living a life of ease, “lie down alike in the dust, and worms cover them.”

We whom Christ instructs to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:43ff) must tremble as Job does when he considers his plight. “The ungodly will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish” (Psalm 1:5-6). Those who die not trusting in Christ, who died for the forgiveness of our sins to give us life and salvation, are like chaff blowing in the wind. Everlasting destruction is their recompense. For them we pray as we reach out with the Word of the Lord. In the meantime, always keeping in mind the suffering of Christ, we pick up our crosses to follow Him in the sure and certain knowledge that--by the grace of God, through faith in Christ--because Christ lives, we too shall live eternally.

Martin Luther said of the book of Job that it is “magnificent and sublime as no other book of Scripture.” This is true in that it deals with tragedy and one man’s reaction to it.

There are a lot of things we do not know about Job. This book is a bit mysterious. One of the interesting features of this first chapter is the description of Job as priest for his family. “Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all.” This fact leads us to believe the book of Job is quite ancient. Instead of an established priesthood, the father of the family takes on the role of priest. There is a little bit of a parallel in our day. When a faithful Christian finds himself geographically isolated from the rest of the Church, he does not join the local false teaching sect that is “close enough” to the truth, the so-called “next best option.” He leads worship and study of the scriptures for his family (if he has one). He seeks out contact with the rest of the Church as often as possible. He seeks out faithful pastors to bring the Lord’s Supper when possible, but he still functions as the “priest” in his family, offering the sacrifices of praise.

Such circumstances will be more common in the near future as we enter a time of disintegration in Western Civilization and the apostasy of Christian churches. Men and women will have to serve as “priests” in their own homes, much like Job.

There is a different kind of suffering in physical affliction. It has a different feel in the mind and soul. It may not be as bad as losing one's children, but it is its own kind of terror.

In the first chapter of the book Job suffers the loss of all his wealth, all his accomplishments in this world, and above all, his children. This kind of devastation brings with it a loss of hope for the future. All that one has built up is gone. With the death of a man's children he feels that there is no purpose, no future. There will be no weddings to attend, no accomplishments for them, no grandchildren. With the affliction of the body comes perhaps fear of death, but certainly fear of incapacity and helplessness. At this point, one does not fear a quick death or no life at all. Job wishes he had never been born. One fears the possibility of being helpless for a long time, maybe permanently.

Job shows us what it is to be stripped down to nothing. No hope for the future and helplessness in the present. Job's great wisdom is in rejecting his wife's admonition. Because all a man has left in that circumstance is the hope of heaven with his God. To throw that away is to lose everything.

When we are stripped of everything, that is when we must live for the world to come. The good that comes from the evil is that we become focused on what ultimately matters. We find our hope in Christ.

Zophar accuses Job of being a wicked man. Job's former status as a father, a wealthy man, and a man whose counsel was sought after has more than crumbled. As successful and prominent as he had been, as far above the norm as his position in life had been, that far below the norm had it now fallen. Yet even in his assault on the beleaguered Job, Zophar makes a good point: "In his self-sufficiency he will be in distress."

To continue yesterday's reference to Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God": "With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected." We can study hard, apply ourselves diligently, and become "successful" in this world. Even the wicked can flourish. But the triumph of the wicked is short. There are no guarantees that any of our efforts will ultimately be anything but a chasing after the wind. The trappings of earthly life all finally turn to dust. But we have the Scriptural promise that if we are faithful we will receive a crown of everlasting life (Revelation 2:10). By being faithful we are anything but self-sufficient. We place our trust in Jesus Christ. We, of ourselves, cannot prevail through all the changes and challenges of life. "But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God").

How frightening the account of Job is. And how filled with hope at the same time! Job had suffered such tremendous loss--family, herds and flocks, his very health. And to add insult to injury, pouring salt on his festering wounds, his "friends" tell him that somehow he deserved his suffering, that he had it coming to him. They suggest some sin, perhaps long forgotten, had so angered God that He inflicted these awful woes on Job. It is a truly misinformed opinion that, if one sins against God, someday, somewhere, when he least expects it, God is going to "even the score." Still, in the very depth of his agony, Job confessed his faith in words that have inspired the ages. His testimony moved Samuel Medley to pen the well-loved Easter hymn, sung also at countless funeral services, "I Know that My Redeemer Lives."

Martin Luther addressed loss like Job's in similar fashion in "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God": "And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won; the Kingdom ours remaineth." May we remain steadfast in our own times of testing, remembering always the words of Saint Paul: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Why does Job wish he died at birth? Obviously he wants his sorrow and suffering to end. Job seems to be thinking, "I could still have my existence as a human being without suffering the agony of this fallen world." But, of course, we do not get to choose our lives. They are given to us as God sees fit. We do not properly have the right to decide when our lives end because they are not our lives. They belong to God. However, Job would not be human if he did not cry out in agony and wish to be free from his suffering. No one would want to live through these things.

The Christian goes through the fire of suffering, following Jesus through the fire. We do not always see where He is leading us, but we trust Him that He will bring us to a good place on the other side. Our life is in Christ, who suffered to redeem us. To cry out in pain is not sinful in itself, but to curse God in our pain is. Christ is greater than our greatest pain, and the life He gives to His faithful people should not be tossed away in favor of self-pity. God's grace is sufficient for us all.

May the Lord keep us faithful by the grace of His Spirit, not cursing the day of our birth out of pain, but remembering that we are born into Christ's life as we are baptized into His death and raised to newness of life in Him.

Do not waste time with a man that says, “The Lord revealed something to me.” It is of no use. Unless it is accompanied by signs and wonders, how can it be taken as universally applicable to all men? But the words of Eliphaz are not even that thought provoking. First, the highly subjective nature of his observations make them of little value. He says, “even as I have seen.” This is the basis for his clearly wrong observation, “Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off?” If this is what he has seen, he has not seen much.

In verses 12 through 16 Eliphaz builds up this revelation with ominous imagery. What he heard with fear and trembling was banal wisdom, “Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?” The obvious answer is no, and it is common sense. One might expect Eliphaz’ next revelation to be something like, “Drink your milk. It’s good for you.”

Well-meaning self-appointed prophets in our day do much the same thing. Charismatic and Pentecostal friends will share their “revelations” with you, but it is usually best to smile and thank them for their love and concern. Whether or not we explain ourselves to them, we must always turn to the sure Word of God in the Scriptures for our guidance. This is especially true in times of suffering.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Sexagesima Sunday

Article VII.

Also, they [the Lutherans] teach, that One holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church, it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” etc. [Eph. 4:5, 6]

Article VIII.

Although the Church properly is the Congregation of Saints and true believers, nevertheless, since, in this life, many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use the Sacraments, which are administered by evil men; according to the saying of Christ: “The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,” etc. [Matt. 23:2]. Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men.

They condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.

—The Augsburg Confession

XII.

Of the Church.

We do not acknowledge them [the Roman Catholics] as the Church, and they are not; we also will not listen to those things which, under the name of Church, they either enjoin or forbid. For, thank God, today a child seven years old knows what the Church is, viz. saints, believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd. For the children repeat: “I believe in one holy Christian Church.” This holiness does not consist in an alb, a tonsure, a long gown and other of their ceremonies devised by them beyond Holy Scripture, but consists in the Word of God and true faith.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article XII

The Book of Concord

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Luke 8:4–14 (NKJV)**

And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable:

“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold.” When He had said these things He cried, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Then His disciples asked Him, saying, “What does this parable mean?” And He said, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that ‘Seeing they may not see, And hearing they may not understand.’

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.

“Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”

“But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.”

The Collect

O God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do, mercifully grant that by Thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“To which of the holy ones will you turn?” Will Job turn to the angels for mediation with God? Who will plead his cause to God? Who will get him recognized as righteous before God? Of course we know the answer to that question. Job will come to say, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God” (19:25-26).

It is interesting that behind the dialog between Job and his counselors is the notion of guilt or innocence. God’s reactions to men are based on their guilt or innocence before Him. This assumption of guilt or innocence, this standing before God as righteous or unrighteous, is a concept that is largely unknown in our modern Western world. Not only would most men in our day assume that they were righteous and innocent, it would not even cross their minds that there was something for which to be guilty. Job would be thought of as some overwrought, hyper-self-critical individual who had overly strict parents that made him guilt-ridden for no good reason.

But, as much as the world would like to ignore a God who demands justice, He simply will not go away. He does demand justice, and we are not clean. We need a Mediator. Praise God that He has provided One for us! Our case is pled for us by the same one Job trusted in, Jesus Christ the Lord.

The HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 17:1–9 (NKJV)

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”

And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.”

The Collect

O God, who in the glorious transfiguration of Thine only-begotten Son has confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of the fathers, and who, in the voice that came from the bright cloud, didst in a wonderful manner foreshow the adoption of sons, mercifully vouchsafe to make us coheirs with the King of His glory and bring us to the enjoyment of the same; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, ever one God, world without end.

As Job’s suffering has grown worse his words have turned more and more desperate until, in today’s reading, he sounds like Jesus in Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, and other Messianic Psalms. Jesus suffered in the very same way as Job—as all the children of men suffer. The difference is that Christ suffered as the Righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

The comfort for the suffering Christian is that he is not alone; Christ has been where he now is, and His Spirit is there with him. Job asks, “If I make my bed in the darkness . . . where then is my hope?” The Psalmist answers in Psalm 139, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.” “Will they go down to the gates of Sheol?” Job asks. Jesus did, and vanquished the devil by His blood, which is shed for us. “Shall we have rest together in the dust?” Jesus rested for a whole Sabbath Day in the tomb. But the grave could not hold Him. He lives to walk with us through this valley of the shadow of death, and to give eternal rest to all who hope in Him.

“Where is my hope? Who can see it?” cries the suffering Christian. Your hope is with Christ. It remains a promise, but a divine promise is as good as gold. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

How do you comfort the one who is suffering? Job's friends are an example of what not to do. "Miserable comforters are you all!" They kept telling him he must have sinned against God and needed to repent of whatever it was, and that if he did, then his suffering would be taken away. The first problem with their "comfort" is that they could not identify any specific sin for which he ought to repent. The second problem is that even repentance does not necessarily bring an end to earthly suffering.

So how do you comfort the sufferer? If there is indeed some obvious sin that has been committed—something identified by God's Word as sin—and if there is clear evidence of impenitence, then restore the one who is suffering by pointing out the sin "in a spirit of gentleness." Then direct the penitent to the Sacraments for God's comfort.

The answer is in what Job yearned for: "Oh, that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleads for his neighbor!" Job yearned for an advocate, for a mediator between God and man. We have such an Advocate and Mediator, Christ Jesus. He, like us, suffered when He was tempted. He suffered pain and loss and anguish of soul, as we do. Now He sits at God's right hand, our Brother who sympathizes with us in our weakness and intercedes for us. The comfort for the one who is suffering is that we have in Christ an Advocate who pleads for us unceasingly.

Job castigates Eliphaz for his counsel. His counsel is a like a stream in the desert. During the rainy season, when travelers have an abundance of water, the streambed is overflowing. During the dry season, when travelers are in need of water in the desert, the streambed is bone-dry. This is a picture of all human understanding in times of trial, and a portrait of human wisdom when dealing with the hidden things of God. How often do we hear people speak about God's will in hospital rooms, funeral homes, and accident scenes, as if any person can comprehend the will of God in allowing evil and misfortune to befall His children? We are tempted to explain the evils of this world when we are unable to do so.

When Jesus was confronted with a question of why God allows suffering in Luke 13, He responds, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Jesus will not have us search the hidden things of God, because as the Lord told Moses in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." We are able to rejoice in our sufferings because we know that God has revealed Himself in Christ to be a God who is for us and not against us. The counsel of the Holy Gospel is not a dry streambed. It is a river of life which comforts us in all afflictions in Christ Jesus.

Job seems to believe the Lord is set against him and that God is his enemy. Job assumes that he is the object of God's target practice. He desires shade and repose from the hard labor of life, yet his master refuses to give him his wages or comfort. He wants relief from his suffering but that suffering is laid upon him by the same God who is to be his comfort and hope. To whom shall Job go in the midst of such an entangling paradox? Where do we turn when God seems to be set against us?

We are to look to the example of our Lord Jesus on the cross. In the great mystery of our salvation, God the Father abandons God the Son since the Lord cannot tolerate sin. This causes Christ to speak the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Christ experienced the full wrath of God against sin and the Divine abandonment in which sinners would otherwise be lost. Christ understood that it was the Father who was afflicting Him. Where did Christ our Lord turn when God the Father became His enemy? He says, "Into Thy hands I commit my spirit." Christ trusts the same Father that is smiting Him in wrath for the sins of the world. This is our pattern in suffering. Though God may be smiting us, we are to turn to Him in confidence. He will not abandon us, because He abandoned Christ. He does not punish us with wrath, because Christ endured the wrath of God. This is the hope of all who believe and are in Christ by faith.

Job's friends may have meant well, but they were pitiful comforters. They blamed Job for all the afflictions he was enduring, and then blamed him some more for not taking comfort in their "word spoken gently." Their argument went something like this: The righteous prosper, and the wicked suffer. You are suffering, therefore you must be wicked.

Actually, their reasoning is reminiscent of Psalm 1, which makes a similar distinction between the righteous and the wicked. The problem is that Job's friends were viewing prosperity and suffering from a worldly point of view. What does the righteous life look like to God? It looks like Jesus' life. What does prosperity look like to God? It looks like Jesus, the Righteous One who endured the cross and shame in this world, and afterwards received the crown of glory. On the other hand, the wicked, who live under God's condemnation, often prosper in this life, as Asaph notes in Psalm 73. The true prosperity of the righteous is the favor of God, which is ours by faith in Christ. But His favor is often hidden here on earth behind suffering and will only be revealed in heaven. Likewise, God's disfavor toward the wicked is often hidden here on earth and will only be revealed later on.

There is comfort for the Christian under the cross—comfort about which Job's friends knew nothing. It is the comfort that suffering and the cross are not signs of God's displeasure, but proofs of His faithfulness. They are the tools that He uses to purify our faith and mold us into the image of Christ, the Righteous One who suffered for us.

The Psalmist asks in awe, “What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?” (Psalm 8:4). Job asks similar questions in agony. Why should God care enough about man to punish him? Job wishes that God would just leave him alone, just let him “hide in the grave,” because he sees no end to misery in this life.

But as much as Job has come to despair of this life, as much as he wants to die, he will not end his own life. His life remains in God’s hands. He pleads with God to end it, expecting that one day his “change” will come, when God will call him from the grave. “And I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands.”

Why should God care enough about man to punish him? A better question would be, why did God care enough about man to become one and to share in our suffering? Why indeed would He take the suffering of our entire race upon Himself, so that by the power of His resurrection we may be freed from sin and from the bondage to decay? Why? Because He so loved the world. For now, there may be misery and pain, but redemption has come, and Job was right. Our “change” will come too, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:52). The voice of the Son of God will call us out of our graves, even as His voice has already penetrated our misery and called us to life in the midst of death.

Bildad the Shuhite assumes that God punishes the wicked for specific sins and rewards the righteous for their lifestyle. His is a prosperity gospel. “If you would earnestly seek God. . . If you were pure and upright,” Bildad says. He tells Job that he is not as righteous as he thinks, otherwise God would be blessing him instead of being against him. “Behold, God will not cast away the blameless, nor will He uphold the evildoers.” Since God afflicts Job, Bildad reasons that Job must have sinned terribly to deserve such a punishment. This is not the case, because the author writes of Job in the first chapter that Job “was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.”

We can be sure that the Lord does not afflict us in wrath for our sins because “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). We do still feel the natural punishments for sins that are built into the created order. These punishments are meant to bring us to repentance for our sins. But we know that God does not afflict us as retribution for our sins, because Christ paid the entire price for the sins of the world by His death on the cross. We can rest assured, knowing that our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west, they are buried at the bottom of the sea. The Lord has trod them underfoot in the absolution won for us by Jesus and received in faith.

Job laments of God, “For He is not a man, as I am, that I may answer Him, and that we should go to court together. Nor is there any mediator between us, who may lay his hand on us both.” Job understands that whatever righteousness he has before God would do him no good. A person can argue with God, but since you are arguing with God, who is there to declare the winner? Job can present his case but the judge to whom he would make his case is the Lord God. Job realizes the futility of trying to bargain with or confront God about an imagined injustice. Job needs a mediator between himself and an angry God.

That mediator is Jesus Christ. He is the propitiation for our sins. He is the one that turns away God’s wrath. Christ dies for the sins of the world to atone for them, so that whoever believes in Him is justified before God the Father in heaven. Faith clings to Christ as our mediator with the Father, knowing that God the Father is pleased with the sacrifice Christ offered for the sins of the world. Now as the ascended and reigning Mediator, He continually intercedes for us before the throne of God. In Romans 8:34 Paul writes, “Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.” When our consciences accuse us of our sins we are to look to Christ Jesus, our mediator who has quelled God’s wrath and still speaks in our favor in the heavenly courtroom.

You do not have to know the reasons why God allows suffering, but that does not mean you cannot seek an answer from God. Job does. He asks, not in unbelief, but in trust. He asks, not in defiance, but in confusion. “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.” He assumes that God has a reason, so he is bold to pursue the answer, trusting that, even now, God will permit the question.

Job is not aware of any specific sin for which he is being punished, but he does not therefore insist that he is innocent. He pleads with God, “Make me know my transgression and my sin.” Or maybe he is not suffering for a specific sin. Why, then? He yearns for an explanation, but receives none. So he asks, “Why do You hide Your face, and regard me as Your enemy?” It does not seem right to Job that God is spending so much time on him, making sure he suffers for whatever he is suffering for. Is he really worth so much trouble?

These are reasonable questions—questions that the saints often ask in the inspired Psalms. This assures us that God permits such questions from His children. He encourages us to seek answers for the suffering in our life, as long as we seek them from Him and His Word. It is the devil who tempts us to look elsewhere, to produce answers from our own imagination or to stop seeking God altogether, assuming Him to be too cruel to care. But He does care. His Word reveals it. It is ok to ask your loving Father, “Why?”

Job wanted desperately to know the reason why he was suffering. His friends gave him a stock answer: “You suffer because God is just, and you are sinful.” In reality, that answer was only a small part of the reason and useless by itself, because Job’s friends were no less sinful than Job was, and if God were to treat them as their sins deserved, they would be in agony together with Job.

We who are privy to God’s dealings with Satan in chapter 1 know the reason why, at least in part. But Job did not know it. Looking back on history, we can see how God has made Job the example to countless saints in their own afflictions, teaching them patience and trust through his book. But Job did not know that. Similarly, the man born blind from John 9 spent decades of his life in darkness while those around him speculated that it was either his sin or his parents’ sin that led to his blindness. It was not until Jesus came that he learned God’s purpose—that God might be glorified through him, and that he might come to know the Son of God.

“You suffer because...” Be careful how you finish that sentence, whether it is for yourself or for someone else. God surely has a reason and a purpose for the suffering of His dear children. But unless He has revealed in His Word what that purpose is, you dare not assume an absolute answer. You do not have to know the reason why. God knows, and that is enough.

Even in despair Job does not forget his place. He never claims to be God’s equal. He is very much aware of how helpless he is before God. He acknowledges that God created him from clay, and that the Lord knit him together in his mother’s womb. He even confesses God’s abundant provision throughout his life. “You have granted me life and favor, and Your care has preserved my spirit.” In the midst of his suffering Job still confesses the first article of the Creed, that God had created him, given him his body and soul, eyes, ears and all his members. Job did not forget his place.

If only Job could have continued on in that confession that the God who created him would still preserve him in all situations and protect him from evil. Although the Lord had lowered the protective hedge around Job and allowed Satan to destroy his wealth and family, the Lord did not give Job over to Satan entirely. The Lord was still good and gracious in not letting Satan take Job’s life. While this may seem like little comfort, this alone demonstrated that the Lord had not utterly forsaken Job.

In our afflictions and sufferings we are to remember that God formed us from the clay. He knows that we are mortal. He also knows how much we can take when it comes to trial and suffering. He will also be gracious to us and spare us for the sake of Christ Jesus. And even should that cross kill our body, we know that we will partake in a glorious resurrection because he cares for us.

Zophar says, “Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?” His words are a stern reminder as we sometimes seek to probe the hidden God. There is much that the Lord has not revealed to us. We are to be content with His revelation in the Scriptures. We are not to forsake that pure and clear revelation that God makes about Himself, nor are we to seek other sources of knowledge about God and His will. The sinful flesh has always wanted to know the things that God has not given us to know. The serpent’s temptation in the garden to be “like God” is the same lie he uses over and over. We are tempted to try to find God outside of His Word because our flesh is not content with the sacred Scriptures.

There is much the Lord has not revealed to us. But what He has revealed to us in Scripture and in Christ Jesus is sufficient for salvation. It is also sufficient to create, build, sustain, and fortify our faith in the midst of suffering. We are confident that what God reveals to us is not contrary to what He has hidden from us. To think that God would say one thing in His Word and think another in His secret counsel would make God “two-faced”. Faith trusts the Word of God written and enfolded in the person of Jesus, who was sent to make God the Father known. We know that what He tells us in Scripture and His hidden thoughts are the same in Christ Jesus.

THE HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 20:1–16 (NKJV)

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?”

They said to him, “Because no one hired us.”

He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.”

So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.”

And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, “These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.”

But he answered one of them and said, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

The Collect

O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Savior, who lives and reign with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.