

Young People's Forum (III.16)

Dear Young People,

I was explaining in the last letter that one of the reasons we should sing Psalms in our worship is because they are our spiritual biography. They are our spiritual biography, because they are the biography of our Lord Jesus Christ during the years he was on earth, when he suffered for our sins, and now in heaven where he sits at God's right hand.

So, the strange and yet wonderful part of it is that when we sing the Psalms, Christ is singing in us and through us by his Holy Spirit. Christ is recounting his own life to us, and Christ is telling us that these experiences in our lives were really his experiences. "I went through these experiences for you, Christ says; and now I want you to go through the same experiences, because that is the way I am going to save you – through all these experiences that I went through. And so when we sing together of our mutual experiences, then you know that you and I are together and will be together forever in heaven."

This union of Christ and his people is what the Bible means when it talks about Christ in us and we in Christ. It is what the Bible means when it says that Christ and his people are one. It is like a duet in which Christ, the bridegroom, sings with his bride to God – who is the Father of us both.

In a way, we can even say that Christ's whole life on earth, and now in heaven, is repeated in us in our sin, our deliverance from sin, our salvation, our struggle with sin, our final victory, and our life with God in heaven.

Let me get back to what I mentioned toward the end of the last letter I wrote to you. I was speaking of Christ's abandonment by God when he suffered on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" To be forsaken by God is to be abandoned by him. Christ was forsaken by God, because he was made guilty for our sins and he bore all our sins in his own body. Our sins deserve hell. Christ had to go to hell because our sins were his sins.

God's abandonment of Christ was a dreadful thing for Christ. I think it is too dreadful for us to understand it fully, but there are a few hints in Scripture that give us a peek behind the veil of Christ's suffering.

For one thing, Christ was the one singing in Psalm 63:

The lovingkindness of my God
Is more than life to me. (Psalter 163, verse 2).

When Christ sang that, he meant exactly what it says: He would rather die than lose the lovingkindness of his God. He did lose it on the cross. He knew he would, because he cried out in great agony: "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I into this hour. Father, glorify thy name" (John 12:27-28).

When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, though he wanted God's will to be done and not his own, he prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." So great was his agony that his sweat was drops of blood – literally. Blood vessels broke and the blood came out his pores and streaked his face. The agony was the dread of being forsaken by his God.

We have something that is a weak figure of it in our relation to our fathers when we were children. If we loved our father and had done something wrong that displeased our father, the punishment he gave us was unendurable. We could not bear the punishment very well, not because it hurt us, but because we could not stand our father to be angry with us. Did he still love us? Had we forfeited that love? Were we still his children? Would he forgive us? Perhaps we quietly crept out of our rooms to which we had been sent, hesitantly to come up behind Father where he was sitting; and then touched his arm and stammer out the words: "Father, do you still love me?"

The thought that our father might not love us was the worst of the punishment, especially if he was very angry.

That is the way it was with Christ – only a thousand times greater. All Christ knew on the cross was his Father's anger and fury against him. It engulfed him in the cross's darkest hour. It swallowed him up and pushed out of him the agonizing cry, "Why? Do you still love me? I can't find any love in all this terrible darkness of thy wrath."

We experience that same abandonment – according to the Psalms.

We must be careful here. We must not get the proud notion in our heads that our suffering is paying for our sins. We can never pay for even the smallest of our sins. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that our sufferings pay for our sins. That is why we need to go to purgatory after we die, because we do not suffer enough in this life to pay for our sins, so we have to suffer after we die to pay what we did not pay here on earth.

But the fact is that if we were to suffer for our sins, we would have to go to hell. And even one sin is enough to send us into hell forever and ever. But Christ paid for all our sins.

Yet we can experience, says the Psalmist, that abandonment that Christ endured. It is certainly true that when we walk in the ways of God's commandments, we know his favor and love. We have fellowship with God. But when we walk in the ways of sin, whether that sin be indifference to and disinterest in spiritual things, or whether that sin be an overt sin of theft or hatred or fornication, we lose that favor of God and know only his wrath.

Maybe at the time we are living in sin, we do not care that God is angry. But that is only because we do not love him. If we do not care when our father here on earth punishes us – if we boast to our friends that our father cannot do anything to us that hurts – if we sneer about father's punishment – the reason is that we do not love our father and we do not care whether he loves us. But if we love our father, as Christ loved his father, then his anger with us makes us feel very bad, and we become afraid.

We are abandoned, so it seems, by our heavenly Father, and we can't stand that. But we know he has a right to be angry. And so we wonder if he still loves us,

Anger, you know is not incompatible with love. Hatred is. Hatred is the opposite of love. If God hates someone, he does not love that person. But a father may be angry with his daughter and still love her. He may and does, in fact, punish his daughter, because he loves her. If God was not angry with us it would only be because he doesn't care enough about us to teach us what is right and what is wrong.

But when he is angry with us, we do not know his love. Although love may be hiding behind anger, we can't see it. And so it is in our relation to God: we do not know his love and we want his love very much.

Many years ago I went to see a young man from the church, because he was not coming to church and was living wickedly. He was drinking too much; he was dating unbelieving girls; he was partying, and all the rest. When I talked with him, he was defiant, cocky and defensive of his life. I said to him, "Dave," for that was his name, "if you keep living the way you are now, you will go to hell." His response was, "I know it, and I don't care."

Later the Lord was merciful to him and brought him to confession of sin. It was almost, according to our thinking, too late. He had gotten some unbelieving girl pregnant and they had to get married because of it. But he was truly repentant; and he frequently came to see me after that, because he wanted help to establish a Christian home – something difficult to do with an unbelieving wife. At any rate, I said to him once: "Dave, do you remember what conversation we had when I told you that if you continued in your life of sin? And do you remember what you said to me in response?" He sadly nodded his head to indicate that he remembered all too well. I asked him, "What did you feel in your heart when you, in such a cocky way, told me you didn't care?" He said to me, "I was so afraid and scared that I just about went to pieces."

When God is angry, it is a dreadful thing.

That anger of God is like being abandoned by him.

This is why the Psalmist can also sing Psalm 22:1. This is why there are so many Psalms in which the Psalmist cries out such things as "Why art thou so far from me?" or, "Why dost thou not answer my prayers?" or, "Come quickly to my rescue." There is one Psalm in which David even says to the Lord, "It seems like thou art asleep or on a far journey, for my cries go unanswered." (I am not going to give you examples of these Psalms, because I want you to read the Psalms and look them up yourself.)

Those are dreadful times, but God uses these times to show us how awful our sins are, and through them he drives us back to him. He drives us back to him, because if we love him, we cannot stand not to know his love for us.

This spiritual frame of mind is exactly how we must come to God in worship on the Lord's Day. To sing these Psalms helps us. You won't find such things in hymns.

With love in the Lord,

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