"The Cave - The Cross - The Christian"
Matthew 27:46

Lent 3 - March 6, 2002

The Fourth Word

"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is,
"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

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I. The Cave

What is he doing in that cave? Why does he look so weak and defeated?

From the very start, this one is a mighty messenger of God. At his first appearing, he infuriates an evil king; and as the beginning of his ministry continues, he finds himself beside a small river for the sake of his life. As time goes on, he performs astonishing miracles: He provides food that just doesn't run out, and he even raises a boy from the dead. The climax is that awful day on that mountain, a horrific battle of good and evil. But there, the Lord faithfully shows His power and defeats His enemies, delivering His called servant. The visible victory is apparent just for a day or so; then the world is back to sin and persecution as usual. For this mighty man of God, there is 40 days in the wilderness without food as he is miraculously sustained. After that, and after the miracles and the defeat of evil, he finds himself in a cave, forlorn and forsaken, wishing that it were his tomb.

At least he feels forsaken. But never mind what the prophet Elijah feels; what matters is the faithfulness of God. So the Lord appears to Elijah and asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

One can hear the despondency in the reply: "I have been zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." It should be a lesson to all Christians: In the battles of life, even the most godly believer can be reduced to near-total despair. Elijah the prophet feels far from victorious; besides the victory over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, the enemy seems to be winning all the time.

As He must do for His children again and again, the Lord teaches Elijah not to trust in appearances. He summons him out of the cave, to stand on the mountain. He brings forth a great wind that breaks rocks in pieces, an intimidating display of force; but God isn't in the wind. He shakes the earth with a powerful earthquake, unsettling and terrifying; but He isn't in the earthquake. The Lord next brings forth fire, implacable and consuming; but He isn't in the fire, either. No, those things look impressive, powerful, intimidating; but that's not how the Lord serves His people.

What is next? The still small voice: "What are you doing here Elijah?" There's no help from God in the wind, the earthquake or the fire; but the Lord always speaks to His people. Elijah repeats his complaint from before, that he is the only one left who is faithful to God. But the complaint shows the lie; beaten up and beaten down by sin and persecution, Elijah isn't all that faithful at the moment.

But the Lord is, always. So He tells Elijah to continue about his tasks as prophet; and He assures him that he is not alone: "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (I Kgs. 19:18). The Lord guarantees that He will have His people, and that they will not be wiped out.

He will have His people, for they are part of His plan for salvation. Out of His faithful people one will be born, one whose life Elijah is already prophesying by his own. The One who will be born will infuriate an evil king at the very start, and He'll make His public appearance at a river when He is baptized. He will also spend forty days in the wilderness without food. He will miraculously feed 5,000 with just a few loaves and fish, and he will also raise a young man from the dead. He will defeat the enemies of God-sin, death and the devil-on a hill one day, after which He will be placed into a cave, seemingly forsaken.

But three days later, He will rise from the dead. He will ascend into heaven and sit on the right hand of God the Father almighty.

He will do this because, whatever Elijah feels, God is faithful and will send the Savior.

And because of the One to come, Elijah is forgiven for his sinfulness and doubt. Because of the One who is coming, Elijah will ascend into heaven in chariots of fire.

II. The Cross

What is He doing on that cross? And why does He look so forsaken and defeated?

Like Elijah on Mt. Carmel, Jesus is on that hilltop, winning the battle over sin, death and the devil; but it's a strange victory indeed. As the Savior is at work to save, He cries out in a loud voice, but His words sound more like Elijah in the cave: "Eli, Eli lama sabachthani?"

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Last night, He prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Thy will be done." The Father's will is a heavy price for the Son.

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

It may strike our ears as strange: God the Father wouldn't really forsake His Son, would He? Jesus must just mean that He feels forsaken, or far away; or that He's playing the part of someone forsaken but isn't really. Right?

Wrong. Of the seven last words of Christ, these are probably the most astonishing. Pay close attention, dear friends, for these words declare to us the full, literal Gospel-the incalculable price that has been paid for your redemption. Jesus Christ, true God-begotten of the Father from all eternity, is on the cross. He who declared "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30) is being crucified. He is not dying as an example, or an accident, or to make us feel guilty.

He is dying our death; and let us be clear, we are not speaking just of physical death. He is suffering eternal death for the sins of all the world. God is unleashing all of His wrath for all sin upon His Son,

and His Son is suffering an eternity of hell as He hangs on that cross.

To use words in their most literal, and not at all profane, sense: At the cross, God damns His Son in our place. For our sin.

This is what St. Paul says in a most amazing statement: For [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Cor. 5:21) God makes His sinless Son to be sin; and because the Son now bears the sins of the world, the Father forsakes Him and condemns Him at Calvary. And because the Son bears all the wrath, there is no wrath left for us; therefore, the Father gives us the sinlessness, the righteousness of Christ. And if we are righteous, forgiven for the sake of Christ, then we are His children and heirs of His kingdom.

Forsaken by His Father, the Son of God suffers an eternity of hell for those three hours. But even while He is forsaken, He remains the Son of God, and His Father is faithful. By the time He dies, the price is paid. By the time He breathes His last, it is finished.

III. The Christian

For our sake, the Son has been forsaken so that you might never be. We find great comfort in this lesson, because no one is immune from despair. King David was a mighty man of God, yet he wrote tonight's prophetic psalm, among many others, of desolation. Along with Moses, Elijah is the foremost of prophets in the Old Testament; yet both of these mighty men felt forlorn and forsaken at times, unwilling to go on.

It is true: Even the most godly Christians may encounter events, defeats and fears that are so devastating that they can't even open up their Bibles anymore. Even the most faithful of believers may be driven to a point where he cries out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

Because such times may lie ahead for any of us, we do well to learn now from Elijah and our Lord.

We learn from Elijah as he stands outside the cave. The Lord is not present in the wind or the quake or the fire. These calamities tell Elijah nothing about who God is or what He wills; they are simply terrible, intimidating things. And after they have come and gone, the Lord speaks to Elijah in a still small voice. After all the frightful phenomena, the Lord gives Elijah His Word.

Cling to the Word at all times, dear Christians. The winds of destructive change may blow through your lives, but these are not a true witness of God's will for you. Tragedy may shake you to the core and leave your lives disrupted, but tragedy is not a reliable witness to God's mercy. Fears can threaten to engulf and consume you, but fears do not tell you of God's love. No, instead of relying on such calamities to tell you who God is, listen to His Word. His Word which endures, despite the winds, the quakes and the fires.

In His Word, He points you to His Son who cries out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" He reminds you that He has forsaken His Son with your sin, so that He will never forsake you. He declares, "Dear child of Mine, you will undergo some fiery trials in this life, but they are not because I am angry with you. My Son has taken My anger away, and you are forgiven. And even when the Son of God was forsaken on the cross, He was still the Son of God; and I raised Him from the dead. Therefore, even when you experience similar anguish, you can say: 'On the cross, Jesus

remained the Son of God. Even though I must bear a cross for now, I remain His child, too.' Your cross is but a little while, for I have promised, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you' (Heb. 13:5)."

This, then, is your comfort, for it is nothing less than the Gospel: Jesus has been forsaken for you, punished for your sins on the cross. Therefore, the Father gives you righteousness, innocence, holiness, life.

He will never leave you nor forsake you, for you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.