

God is the Strength of My Heart

- 12 This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.**
13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.
14 All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.
15 If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.
16 When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply
17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.
23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.
24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.
25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
27 Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
28 But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

A man spends his life pursuing the love of God. He works, truly works, at obeying God's will. He recites the commandments and the creed. He prays not one but several prayers at his bedside each night. He prays in the morning. He adds prayers to his table prayers, and he spends time in the word of God every day. He intentionally crafts his words and the language he uses so that he will not offend God or his fellow man.

But then he can't help but notice: Wicked men, sinful women, surround him, and they all seem to be better off than he is. He begins to think: Why bother? What am I getting out of all this? Couldn't I cut a spiritual corner, and make a little progress in my life? He thinks: The sinners that I know all seem happy, and I'm miserable. "All day long I've been afflicted," he says, "and every day I get punished"-- and all of these things make him wonder: Should I give up on my faith because the wicked prosper?

Now, in our Psalm, the writer (Asaph, one of my favorite Bible writers) is stumbling almost into despair because the wicked prosper. He is beginning to think that crime really does pay. What do we get out of serving the Lord if the wicked are rewarded and they clearly get ahead in life precisely because they are wicked?

The wicked people whom Asaph is describing are no different from people today who have no regard for God, no fear of God, no faith in God. These are people who even boast about their sins; they invite you along to justify their sinfulness. They think: "If I can get this Christian person to come along with me, then maybe I'm not so bad." They don't know anything about Jesus Christ or how sin is forgiven. They honestly think that if they can tempt one of God's faithful people—you—to join in their sin, then they have a chance at forgiveness. But forgiveness through temptation is as ridiculous as forgiveness through good works or anything else that just leads people away from Christ.

Let's look for a moment at Jesus and the wickedness that surrounded him. And yes, there were the Romans and the Scribes and Pharisees and so on, but there was also his beloved disciple, Judas. He had called Judas to be more than a disciple, but an apostle, one of the Twelve. Judas were there for the miracles, the parables, the intimate moments of teaching off by themselves in the countryside. Judas, with the other Eleven, had been sent out to heal the sick, preach the gospel, and drive out demons. But he was overpowered by Satan and by greed. He thought that he could betray Jesus and make a profit. Who knows? Maybe he counted on Jesus getting away from the Romans, and maybe he thought that he could betray him again and again, and keep making a profit from it, but Jesus gave in to that very first betrayal.

Judas knew his sin right then and there. It does not pay to be wicked; the devil is never your friend. Asaph, the author of our Psalm, also understood that. On the verse of falling into sin himself, he shares his experience. He says: **"I entered the sanctuary of God."** Here was a man who was in the sanctuary every day. He worked there. Asaph was King David's chief musician. In the depth of his despair, he entered the church, the old testament Tabernacle which David had moved and set up on Mount Zion in preparation for the construction of the Temple by his son Solomon, and for once he did not grab an instrument and think about what he had to play that day. He watched what was happening, and he listened to what was being said, and he remembered.

There would have a worshiper, bringing an offering. Maybe this was a thank offering, a donation of food, salt and wine for the priests and Levites. Or maybe it was someone who brought an animal sacrifice. A sin offering was an animal who had to be put to death before the altar, the blood caught and thrown against the sides of the altar, the flesh arranged carefully to be consumed by the fire.

This was a sacrifice that pointed ahead to Christ. As Asaph sat or stood quietly watching what was going on, the illustration would have been carried out: The Lamb of God was brought to the priests. He was declared to be a holy sacrifice without any fault. Certainly the priests could not agree on any accusation, and lacking a judgment from the priests, the Holy Spirit records the judgment of the highest court in the land: Pontius Pilate, who three times in John's Gospel declares: "I find no fault in this man."

Yet he was taken away to be slaughtered, with the words of the High Priests hanging in the air: **"It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."**^a Like an unclean thing, the perfectly holy Jesus was led outside the city and put to death with the criminal's execution, the cross. His flesh was arranged just so by the Romans soldiers and nailed into place. His blood fell onto the altar of the cross on all sides, and in his death, he fulfilled every prophecy about the death of the Lamb of God in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.

Asaph goes on: **"Then I understood."** He understood that the fate of the wicked lies apart from the cross of Christ; the fate of the wicked is to be punished eternally like Christ was because they reject the punishment Christ endured on our behalf.

^a John 11:50

And then Asaph chants the words I hope you will take home with you today and treasure always: **“Whom have I in heaven but you?”** This isn’t saying that we don’t have any loved ones in heaven, as if we go to our eternal glory as orphans with no one there we will know, the way some of the new students at MLC feel this weekend, knowing nobody on campus yet at all.

No, Asaph is saying in a roundabout way: **“Do you know who I have in heaven? Sure, my mother and my father are there, and my uncles and aunts and grandparents and a childhood friend already called by God. But guess what? I have someone else, and it’s none other than Jesus Christ himself! Who do I have in heaven, O Lord? It’s YOU!”**

What do you and I have in heaven? It’s none other than the very same Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ. Crucified to pay the full penalty for our sins, Jesus waits for us, having prepared a place for us there with him.

This temptation we face of thinking that the wicked get ahead in life, that crime pays, that serving God is just too hard to keep up for very long. Those are lies hissed into your ear by the devil and by the fallen, corrupted world around us.

When we have slipped and fallen because of this temptation into sin and despair, we take that to Jesus. Listen to his offer and take it to heart: Believe in me, he says. I offer you forgiveness and new life in my blood. Be restored through faith in Jesus to the purity of your baptism, and know that today, right now, you are absolutely as pure and as forgiven as that moment when the water of your baptism still sat in beads on your forehead as you were held in loving arms, by a parent or godparent standing the place of God the Father himself who has been holding you ever since.

And in that forgiven state, go today and live your life.

Encourage your family and the people you love with the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Model your faith and be an example. Pray at home with your family or if you’re alone don’t be afraid to pray with your dog or cat. Your animal may not have faith-- he doesn’t need it, knowing the Maker better than most of us with souls. But you know it, and what better way to practice it than to share it at every turn, even if it’s just sprinkling a pinch of flakes into the fishbowl?

Model your faith by considering the kind of words you will use today. How should I respond when my buddy at work exaggerates and takes the Lord’s name in vain? If you don’t have the courage to tell him, “That’s the name of my Savior you’re misusing,” then you can at least never mimic his words. In the end, people will respect you more for not swearing than for doing it, but that’s not why we avoid it. We avoid it because God asks us to, commands us to do so, in the Second Commandment. It’s about more than his word; it’s about the very language we speak, and the gift of communication, which should be a tool for the Gospel and not a tool for the devil’s foolishness.

“As for me,” Asaph sighs, “It is good to be near God.” What better future can we yearn for? What better present can we display? What better truth can we share? Love one another, and share the joy, the forgiveness and the promise of Jesus, the Strength of My Heart.

God our Holy Father, we praise and thank you for blessing Isaac and Briana Benzing with the gift of a healthy baby son, Grayson Jon. Send your angels to protect them today and always, and enable Grayson's parents to raise him in your word and in your way.

We also ask your blessing on the schools that are opening this week especially Martin Luther College. Protect faculty and students from all dangers, temptations, worries and cares, and help our college of ministry to focus on the task at hand: training young people for service in your church.