

Sermon on LORD'S DAY 15
by Rev. Dr. J. Faber

N.B. The liturgy is according to the 1984 edition of the Book of Praise

Liturgy:

Isa. 52:13- 53:12

Ps. 43:1

Ps. 40:3

Hy. 22:5.6.7

(Hy.15:1-3)

Hy. 17

Ps. 85:4

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,
I administer to you the Word of God according to the confession of the church about

THE UNIQUE SUFFERING OF OUR MEDIATOR JESUS CHRIST

1. His suffering from God's wrath obtained for us grace
2. His suffering from God's judgment obtained for us righteousness
3. His suffering from God's curse obtained for us eternal life

1. HIS SUFFERING FROM GOD'S WRATH OBTAINED FOR US GRACE.

In the unfolding of that which is necessary for a Christian to believe, in the proclamation of the promise of the gospel (cf. LD 7,A.22), our Heidelberg Catechism is broader than the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed simply speaks about Jesus Christ, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, after He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

There is a kind of chasm, or void there. After the confession about Christ's holy conception and birth, the Creed jumps to the end of His life on earth. So the beginning and the end of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ receive all attention and emphasis, but no mention is made of that which was between these two events. The Creed omits the youth of the Lord Jesus, His life, words, miracles, and so on.

The Heidelberg Catechism follows the Apostles' Creed, but it has a slightly different approach. Question and answer 37 speak about the word "suffered" — the suffering of Christ -, and question and answer 38 specify and deal separately with Christ's suffering under Pontius Pilate as judge. The one sentence of the Apostles' Creed is taken apart and divided over two questions. The different elements receive a place and character in this way and the content is deepened.

You can notice it in the beginning of the first answer. What does it mean that He suffered? That all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. The Catechism acknowledges that especially at the end of His life our Lord Jesus Christ suffered, but our Confession does not forget that all the time He lived on earth our Mediator bore God's wrath against sin.

This wrath of God did not come upon Him suddenly, and only at the end of Christ's life. You do not understand the specific character of Christ's suffering — you do not even surmise the heaviness of the passion of the one Mediator and Surety -, if you only take into account the end of His life on earth. For throughout His life, from the very beginning to the end, He bore the burning anger of the living God.

Look, congregation, in our ecclesiastical year we are used to seven weeks of Lent. In that period Christians speak and think about the last days of Christ's life-in-humiliation: Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha. They listen to the St. Matthes's Passion of Bach, and they concentrate on a cult of the cross of Christ. But such a seemingly pious cult may mean a denial of the real significance of the cross. For the preaching of the cross begins with the manger in Bethlehem and encompasses all the time Jesus Christ lived on earth.

Why are certain people moved to tears when they listen to a Passion of Bach, or why are they impressed by a musical such as *Godspel*, while at the same time they do not believe the folly of the preaching of the cross? Would it not be, because they identify with a suffering Jesus, one among others, but they do not accept and believe the message of Scripture about the unique suffering of Christ? To be sure, they would like to hear about a man bound, bruised, clothed with purple, crowned with thorns, mocked, oppressed and persecuted. But they do not want to hear about the wrath — the wrath of God — that was on the Lord Jesus right from the beginning of His life on earth till the end, because of the sin of the whole human race. This exactly is the offense of the cross; the cross is a stumbling block. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God, 1 Cor.1:24.

Therefore, congregation, it is very Scriptural that the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 15 starts with the confession about Christ's suffering from God's wrath all the time He lived on earth.

It pictures the whole life of your Saviour in the light of Scripture. It shows you His life as your Surety and Mediator, the life of the Son of God who became man, to take our place, to suffer in our stead. His passion was not a part of common human suffering; it was completely unique. It was the passion of satisfaction, the suffering of atonement; the Lord Jesus Christ made payment to the justice of God.

It was the passion of the Son of God who had become flesh with a specific purpose: for us and our salvation. His whole life was suffering, and His suffering was His office, His calling, His task.

We cannot give a biography of the Lord Jesus; in a biography we try to analyze someone through his background. But if we would try to give a biography of the Lord Jesus, we would misjudge Him, for He is the Son of God who became man with a completely unique office.

You cannot explain Him by something of this earth, for He has been SENT by God. This being sent by God determined His life: I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but He sent me (John 8:42). We may see GOD in Him, the triune God, the Father and the Son, and also the Holy Spirit through Whom He is going to offer Himself without blemish (Heb. 9:14). For this is the office He is to discharge as man. He was to suffer and that throughout His whole life. Right from the outset His life and His passion are determined by the Lord God and His justice.

God puts His wrath upon Christ, and Christ accepts the burden of this wrath of God. This wrath of God controlled His lowly birth; God's anger was manifest in the manger and His wrath burned when the Lord Jesus was circumcised. Sure, then the Lord Jesus was still a child; in the manger He was a babe that was not conscious of anything. But do you think that He did not suffer? He was in the state of humiliation; His legal status before God was a state in which He was to suffer. Suffering is not only something that you feel in your consciousness, but suffering to Him was something that was inflicted by God, because of our sin; it was a manifestation of God's wrath. Even in our own common human life we say, when a baby loses its mother, "What a suffering for this child!" It is but an illustration, for the passion of the Lord Jesus was unique, but do you see that He suffered already right in the beginning of His human life?

He bore in body and soul, the Catechism says, the wrath of God. God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12). He is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day (Ps. 7:11). Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the heat of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken asunder by Him (Nahum 1:6).

Modern man does not want to hear about this wrath of God. They say: "God is love, is He not?" Sure, Scripture proclaims the love of God, but just because God is love, therefore His wrath is so terrible. His wrath is the reverse side of His love. In His wrath the heat of His love burns against everyone who rejected His love. Now — we — the whole mankind, rejected and insulted God's love in Paradise. Therefore the wrath of God is real; it is wrath against SIN.

This wrath of God, congregation, was upon your Saviour Jesus Christ. He bore this wrath throughout His life. God's wrath was upon Jesus, when His parents fled to Egypt. It burned against Him, when He was brought to Nazareth, in the despised part of Palestine, Galilee of the Gentiles, so that He later suffered the misjudgment of His office and of His Person, when people said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature" (Luke 2:52): he was a child, a teenager, an adolescent. He searched Scripture, for Scripture bears witness to Him. The Old Testament prophesied of the coming of the suffering Servant of the Lord. Scripture spoke of the wrath of God against sin, and it was this wrath He was come to bear, He who was smitten by God and afflicted.

Did you ever think about it that when the Lord Jesus grew up and increased in wisdom, He also increased in knowledge of the wrath of God? Also this wrath of God itself increased in intensity. The wrath of God increased the more the Lord Jesus came near to the cross.

At the beginning of His public appearance the Lord Jesus spoke to John the Baptist: "Thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." (Mt. 3:15). The Lord Jesus mingled with publicans and harlots, and went into the water of baptism, but in doing so He drew as it were the wrath of God against sin toward Himself.

God's wrath was there in the temptations by Satan, in the obstruction by Pharisees and scribes, in the misunderstanding of His disciples, in those boasting words of Peter, in Peter's denial, in Judas' betrayal, in the flight of the disciples, in the enmity of the Jewish council and in the corruption of Pontius Pilate.

You hear the suffering Christ, when He cries out, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?" (Luke 9:41). "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I constrained until it is accomplished!" (12:50).

Sure, there were moments of refreshment during Christ's life on earth. But in the background there was always the suffering because of the wrath of God against our sin. And at the same time there was the complete obedience of Jesus Christ, who loved God and His neighbour and who paid the penalty of our guilt, the guilt of our hate. Each act of Christ, each word, was a part of His labour as Mediator between God and us. Christ covered our sin-ridden life, from the beginning to the end.

At the end there was, says the Catechism, the climax, the consummation of God's wrath. In Gethsemane God still sent an angel, a servant who strengthened Him. But on the cross of Calvary all angels of God stayed away. No single token of God's favour was left.

The Christ was pushed away into the caverns of hell. He entered eternal death, step by step. Even the light of the sun is taken away from Him, the first gift of creation is withdrawn. The winds of God's anger are blowing in full strength. The anguish and torment of hell surround Him and His God forsakes Him completely, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Congregation, in this way, Christ learned obedience through what He suffered; this love toward God and the love toward His Church became completely clear. In those hours of darkness there is the climax of the work of our Mediator, the consummation of His obedience, of His passive and active obedience. He undid what we had done wrong and He performed what we had neglected.

Christ bore the wrath of God and He obtained for us God's grace. Christ atoned the sins of His people. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end (John 13:1). Love makes a choice; and His love had chosen His Church, His own, according to the eternal choice, the election, of His God.

The catechism joyfully and gratefully confesses: by His passion, as the one atoning sacrifice, he redeemed our body and soul — yes, our body too! — from everlasting damnation and he obtained for us the grace of God. Grace is sin-forgiving favour; unmerited favour. Christ gained for us the favour of God.

Now we may live again in communion with God.

Behold, both joy and light will dawn for the upright.

Rejoice in God!

2. HIS SUFFERING FROM GOD'S JUDGMENT OBTAINED FOR US RIGHTEOUSNESS.

We confess the unique suffering of our Mediator Jesus Christ. We now come to the second point: His suffering from God's judgment obtained for us righteousness.

Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?

It is remarkable, brothers and sisters, that the short Apostles' Creed mentions the name of Pontius Pilate. Each first day of the week in many languages the name of Pontius Pilate is pronounced in worship services of Christians. Why did the early Christian Church make mention of this Roman

governor? Why not Annas, or Caiaphas, or Judas, or Peter? In answer to this question you may say even more than the Catechism does.

a) First of all, you may say that it indicates that the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ was historical; it was real suffering in a definite time in this our history. It was not something beyond our history, but it took place IN our history. You know, the custom was to mention the name of the ruler to record an event. Isaiah had his vision in the year when King Uzziah died. Joseph was taxed when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So the Lord Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate. The preaching of the cross does not speak about a myth; it is not a figment of our imagination; it is a historical, real fact. "This was not done in a corner." (Acts 26:26).

This is very significant for our redemption. Just as the sin of Adam took place in this world and in this history — the history in which we are born and die —, so God sent His Son in the fullness of time, born of woman, born under the law (Gal. 4:4). Christ came under the law, the law of Moses, but also under the law of the authorities of Rome. His suffering was a real and human suffering, on this earth, before a real earthly judge, in a real court.

b) You may say about Christ's suffering under Pontius Pilate more than this first element. You may also say that in suffering under Pontius Pilate, Christ atoned for the sins of authorities too. In this way He gained all authority in heaven and on earth. He has been ordained as the Ruler of kings on earth. In the way of His suffering under the world empire of Rome He became the king of kings. His kingdom is not of this world; His kingship does not arise from this world; but, nevertheless, it is for this world. His kingship claims the whole world, the world of politics, and of economics, and of all kinds of powers. In Scripture the kings of this earth are addressed, "Now, therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss His Son" (Ps. 2:10,11).

c) In the early Christian church people were persecuted and brought before earthly judges. Then they were comforted and encouraged by the confession that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself made the good profession before Pontius Pilate. You know how Paul writes about that to Timothy: "In the presence of God who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (1 Tim. 6:13,14). We may testify and witness without fear and very boldly; we may freely speak about the name of Christ and of His wonderful service.

All this and much more is implied in this confession of the church that the Lord Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. But the Catechism mentions only one essential thing.

d) Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge? That He, though innocent, might be condemned by a temporal judge, and thereby free us from the severe judgment of God to which we were subject.

The Catechism points to the justice of God, and the judgment of God. For behind the earthly judge there is the heavenly Judge. He who stands before a judge on earth, stands before GOD. Judges are lieutenants of God. King Jehosephat rightly said to the judges in Judah: "Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD; He is with you in giving judgment" (2 Chron. 19:6). In their office, judges point to the great court, to the last judgment. Our Lord Jesus Christ

acknowledged Pontius Pilate in this his office as servant of God. Sure, from the side of Pilate himself there was nothing but injustice and corruption. Several times Pilate declared the Lord Jesus to be innocent, and, yet, he handed Him over to the Jews to be crucified. But behind the injustice of Pilate the Lord Jesus Christ looked upon the justice of God, and He saw the God of justice. In the figure of Pilate GOD approached the Christ, and GOD called Him to his court: "Second Adam, where are you?"

The Christ did not flee away like the first Adam. He came and stood before God, and said: Here I am, LORD. Judge Me, condemn Me, that My people may not be judged and may not be condemned. Did He not say to Pilate: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above..."? (John 19:11).

When Pilate as judge delivered the Christ to be crucified, our Lord Jesus Christ did not protest. For He knew: GOD judges Me. God made me to be sin, though I knew no sin, so that in Me my people may become the righteousness of God (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

And so Christ suffered from God's judgment, that He might obtain for us eternal righteousness.

Now you and I may be comforted in all our sorrows and persecutions. Later on in the Catechism we will confess that Christ shall come to judge the living and the dead (QA. 52). With uplifted head, with eager longing, I may look for the very same Person who before has offered Himself for my sake to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me. If the thought of the last judgment makes me shudder, I may think of Gabbatha, the tribunal of Pontius Pilate. There stood He who is about to judge the world. He stood for my sake for the tribunal of God. He received the severe judgment of God to which I was subject. God maintained His justice against HIM, and showed mercy to ME. What should I fear then? Christ is my righteousness forever!

3. HIS SUFFERING FROM GOD'S CURSE OBTAINED FOR US ETERNAL LIFE.

For there is also the last point: Christ's suffering from God's curse obtained for us eternal life. Is there anything in His having been crucified than if He had died some other death? Yes, since thereby I am assured that He took on Himself the curse which lay upon me; for the death of the cross was accursed of God.

The Lord Jesus was not stoned to death, but according to God's decree and providence He was crucified in the land of Israel and in the manner of the Romans — In Israel the cross was the token of the total curse of God. In the Mosaic law we read: "If a man has committed a crime punishable to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God..." (Deut. 21:22,23). Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.

A hanged man is the object of the full wrath of God; he is thrown into complete isolation, thrown out by earth and not accepted by heaven. The cross and the curse proclaim the absolute forsakenness of eternal death. A hanged man is accursed by God.

Therefore, God had chosen this terrible death on the cross for the Christ. It was in agreement with His eternal justice and righteousness. Was the Christ not the Surety of His people, who bore their sins in His body on the tree (cf. 1 Pet. 2:24)?

How could otherwise the blessing come to us, if He had not become a curse for us? All the cyclones of God's wrath blew against the Christ on the cross. Who will ever be able to fathom the depth of God's curse?

The Lord Jesus Christ endured it all for US. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). He bore the wrath of God; He was not merely passive, but He was active. He drew to Himself God's judgment, to free us from it. He has taken the curse from us upon Himself that He might fill us with His blessing.

He was the Lamb of God, and at the same time He was the High Priest. He was lifted up on the cross, and He offered Himself to God: Lo, I have come to do Thy will, O God. He did not hesitate, not even for a moment, but He accomplished His calling.

Now, you and I may lift up our head.

God's wrath has been appeased by Him, My Surety and Saviour.

Now I may lift up my head. He submitted Himself to God's severe judgment.

Now I may lift up my head. He also bore the curse. He obtained for us eternal LIFE.

Praised be Jesus Christ.

Amen.