

COMMUNION:
Jesus and the Broken-hearted
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April 2, 2011

When one reads Jesus' last prayer with His disciples in John 17, it flows easily and serenely, as if He were utterly calm and unperturbed as He faced His horrible death. Reading it with the unimpassioned spirit of reading a scientific lecture deprives us of the true meaning of this prayer. It cannot be truly understood except in the light of Hebrews 5:7, 8. In fact, if we say John 17 is the "High Priestly Prayer," then it becomes obvious that this passage in Hebrews describes this particular prayer! "A high priest forever . . . who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him [the Father] who was able to save Him from death . . ." The John 17 prayer was prayed with "strong crying and tears"! The thought of dying under the curse of God (Gal. 3:13) filled the soul of Jesus with dread, infinitely more so than any criminal who faces death by injection on Death Row. The latter kind of death is only a sleep with the sense of God's forgiveness; the death Jesus faced was the sum total of all hopeless deaths under that "curse of God." He was in the process of being "made to be sin for us who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). In a few minutes He would be pleading, agonizingly, with the Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me!" (Mt. 26:39). In other words, Oh Father, please find some other way for Me to save the world short of

dying on a cross! And then, another convulsion of tears. Perhaps this might help us make sense of His repeated request about being "glorified" in Jn. 17:1, 4, 5, 10, 22, 24. He isn't begging to be a "show-off"! When He pleads with the Father to "glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may glorify Thee," He means, "Please enable Me to demonstrate *agape* throughout the terrible trial that faces Me! Hold Thou My hand! Don't let Me stumble and fall! Save Me from letting self mar My witness! Teach Me to be patient when they beat Me, pull out My beard, spit in My face, revile Me, lie about Me, mock Me, strip Me, exhibit Me, and nail Me to a tree!" We read that the grace of God was upon Him throughout His life on earth (Lk. 2:52); never did He need it and beg for it more than now. If He can endure, that will be "glory"! And this brings us to the same "glory" that He "has given" those who believe in Him (Jn 17:22). They need unity! Is there any other way that they can learn to "be one, even as [He and the Father] are one"?

Psalm 22 tells us of Christ's agony of soul as He hung on the cross—not just the physical pain (that was awful enough!), but the soul agony of bearing "the curse of God," enduring hell on our account. Psalm 69 also describes His enduring hatred throughout His life (vss. 7-12), and on the cross (vss. 17-21), but now there's a different element added: He cries for vengeance on those who have abused Him. "When I was hungry, they gave Me poison; when I was thirsty, they offered Me vinegar. . . Strike them with blindness! . . . Pour out Your anger on them . . . May their camps be left

deserted; may no one be left alive in their tents. . . Keep a record of all their sins; don't let them have any part in your salvation. May their names be erased from the book of the living. . . “ (vss. 21-28, GNB).

Now, here's a problem: how can you reconcile those dreadful imprecations with the prayer of Jesus at His cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" (Lk. 23:34)? Both that prayer and those imprecations are the words of Jesus! And both prayers were answered by the Father! He forgave them then, but forgiveness is more than blinking the divine Eye and saying "I don't care what you do, murder My Son, that's OK with Me!" God's forgiveness includes the actual removal of the sin from the heart, which is through accepting His enormous gift of repentance. And some who crucified Christ did repent—apparently the Roman centurion, for one. But those who did not accept repentance on the Day of Pentecost but hardened their hearts, suffered every iota of those divine imprecations. The human urge for redress, for justice, is not evil; it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. God is greatly concerned for justice! "To crush under His feet all the prisoners of the earth, to turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High, to subvert a man [or woman] in his cause, the Lord approveth not" (Lam. 3:34-36). But what's the key in understanding this apparent contradiction in Jesus' prayers? (1) It is right to protest injustice, for Jesus did. (Jn. 18:23; Mt 26:55). (2) We are not to exact our own redress or vengeance, because our inborn love of self will cause us to act unjustly.

"Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth" (Prov. 24:17). (3) Leave the revenge to the Lord to work it out" "Avenge not yourselves, . . . for it is written, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). (4) Trust Him to take care of it; He did for Jesus—all too thoroughly. Consider the later history of His murderers. Let's trust Him, too.

Let me make two statements and you decide which of the two is closer to the truth: (1) Justification is by faith, or (2) justification is by grace. If you are perplexed, note again what Ephesians 2:8, 9: "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works lest any man should boast." That's true; it's impossible that our faith could even exist were it not for grace being first. Our faith is a response to God's grace. So, we are saved by grace, but the instrument, through which we receive and appreciate that grace, is our faith. And when the text says we are saved by grace, the "we" must mean the human race, because God's grace is not doled out selectively according to whether people do something good to deserve it, or not. His grace is given to all as freely as air circulates around the globe. Christ has become the second Adam, reversing the "condemnation" that the first Adam brought upon the entire human race. Thus He gives, not merely offers, His grace to everyone alike. Many despise His grace, and choose to rebel, but whenever someone believes, he is simply responding to the initiative that Christ has taken in his salvation.

Now, back to our question: are we justified by grace, just as we are saved by grace? Justification and forgiveness are the same; and we read often in the Bible that God's forgiveness has preceded our need for it. For example, when wicked people crucified the Son of God, He did not wait for them to repent first; He prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Before Peter denied Him Christ forgave him. In becoming the new Head of our human race, Christ took us into Himself; He took our sin into Himself, and died to pay its penalty; and the death He died was what the Bible calls the real thing, the second death. And this is the only reason why God can treat the human race as though they had never sinned. If He were to treat us as we deserve we would die immediately. We are all subjects of grace! One wise writer has said that by His sacrifice, Christ has pronounced a "reprieve" upon us; and that is what Paul says: just as Adam brought upon us all a "judicial . . . verdict of condemnation," so Christ has pronounced on us a "judicial . . . verdict of acquittal" (Rom. 5:15-18, NEB). All, by grace! And our faith becomes the instrument whereby we receive and appreciate this grace, so that then we are "justified by faith." Hold your head high! You are a child of grace. Now, live so as to prove it.

I had never thought of it before--(now it seems so obvious!)--when in Daniel 9 the angel told the prophet that "seventy weeks are determined [cut off] upon thy people" from the grand total of 2300 years (8:14; 9:24-27), that meant that the Lord was giving Israel 490 annual days of atonement as their

last cumulative, corporate probation as a nation, 490 gracious calls from heaven! Talk about patience! Peter, wake up.

Peter expressed our usual sense of impatience with the foibles of other people with his question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Jesus said to him, ' . . . Up to seventy times seven'" [490!] (Matt. 18:21, 22).

The annual day of atonement in ancient Israel was their call to corporate and national repentance. As it came each year on the tenth day of their seventh month, it was their invitation from heaven to ponder anew their sin of national rebellion against God that must culminate at last in the cruel murder of the Son of God—unless Israel as a nation in the meantime should repent.

Sporadic efforts were made from time to time, but never did the nation corporately grasp their divinely appointed calling. Always, since Mt. Sinai, the Old Covenant had dwarfed their understanding. Now the Lord will demonstrate the extent of His forgiveness—"up to seventy times seven" solemn days of atonement passed over while unrepentant, the call unheeded. Then the divinely appointed limit. And then they stoned Stephen in 34 A.D., exactly 490 years after the beginning of their 2300 year prophecy.

Now we're living in the great antitypical, cosmic, grand Day of Atonement for the world. Thank you, Peter, for helping us with your question. Shall we stone "Stephen" anew?

A question that perplexed the disciples of Jesus perplexes us today: Peter asked, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” The “sin” obviously was not an ordinary one: it was “against” Peter, something that wounded him personally. The apostle was mature enough spiritually to realize that “seven” is a complete number; it must be the limit for this difficult task.

The sin “against” him was so hurtful that Peter felt it threatened his personhood. Already he was beginning to sense dimly that Jesus was a “Forgiver”: little inklings of what led Him later to pray for His murderers, “Father, forgive them!” were showing through. Peter understood that it was his duty to forgive; but it was difficult to do! Nurturing resentment was so sweet to indulge in.

When Jesus enlarged the limit to “seventy times seven” He told about the enormously guilty yet forgiven thief who couldn’t forgive his debtor his trifling debt. He ended the little session with the blunt warning that His heavenly Father will not forgive us our “trespasses” if [we] do not forgive from [our] heart [our] brother his trespasses,” obviously those we feel are so “against” us (Matt. 18:21-35).