

## CONFESSING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH TODAY

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Adkinson

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The week before Christmas Kay and I invited friends of mine from years ago to dinner. Several years ago their young son, David, died after a long bout with cancer. Since David's death, his father, especially, has been struggling spiritually. He's a man of deep faith – probably, next to my father, the most spiritually influential man in my life. But his faith is now severely tested and tempted. His struggle is a vivid reminder of the dark night of the soul many faithful people experience. After dinner we talked long into the night about his faith struggles. No matter who we are, the death of loved ones overwhelm us with grief but our grief is all the more acerbated if we are people of deep faith because we're tempted to question the reality of the God who seemed absent when we cried out to him in prayer for healing and deliverance.

I thought of my friend while preparing my sermon. I had read the Scripture lessons and meditated on them. I jotted down notes and thoughts. I consulted commentaries and other books. I prayed but I had no clear sense of direction and Sunday was coming fast. I took a break to check my email. There was a new email from my friend. I opened it and came upon these words about half way through: "What I have been struggling with since our David's death is: How provable are some of our fundamental Christian doctrines? More specifically the efficacy of prayer. When you pray... does God change His mind?" Here is not a coldly analytical question of an arm chair theologian – but the heart-rending cry of a grieving father whose faith is being severely tested. He went on to say, "Historically, Christians have believed in the healing power of prayer. There is Biblical support for this hypothesis, and there is no lack of anecdotal example to support their claim." But can it be proved? "If prayer has protective and healing powers, then, individuals who pray for safety, health, and healing, would live longer than others would who do not pray and no prayers are made on their behalf."

I couldn't get his email out of my mind. Having made little progress with my sermon I decided to take time to respond. I suddenly saw a connection between my friend's question about prayer and all four of this morning's Scripture lessons. In our Epistle Lesson, Paul claims that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Saved from what? From death, from disease, from conflict, from trouble, from hell?

What shall we be saved from if we call on the name of the Lord in prayer? In Deuteronomy, Israel cried to the LORD in prayer and God delivered them “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” In Psalm 91 God says, “When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.” The Psalmist makes some other extravagant claims: “no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.” I’ve always felt uncomfortable reading those words to someone terminally ill. The extravagant claims run counter to so much of my own experience.

As I attempted to answer my friend’s question I discovered that I was entering into his struggle. His struggle was becoming mine. I thought of my own experience - how I prayed for my niece to be healed from her mental retardation and my dad to be healed of his Alzheimer’s disease that robbed him of his memory and identity. But God didn’t deliver (at least in any observable way). My prayers weren’t answered as I had hoped they would. It seems God is good at answering prayers to get over colds but doesn’t usually deliver on the big items.

So I went back to meditating on the Scripture lessons. Does the Psalmist, in fact, say that God will not allow anything bad to happen to those who love God OR does he, rather, suggest something else – that we are never finally alone - that God will be with us in all circumstances no matter how tragic? God will not necessarily deliver us *from* our troubles but be with us *in* our trouble – at least in some hidden way.

I began to think about the hiddenness of God revealed in unanswered prayer. My thoughts led me to Christ’s temptations in the wilderness. When we’re tempted, never does God seem so far away and hidden. Jesus must have experienced God’s absence as he struggled with the Devil’s temptations. Jesus overcame the temptation by making decisions that led directly to his crucifixion. Jesus knew that God would be more clearly revealed in his crucifixion than in any miraculous answer to prayer. In his temptations, Jesus must have thought

something like this: "How do I reveal God? I could miraculously turn stones to bread in answer to prayer. I could display God's power by single handedly routing all God's enemies in answer to prayer. I could perform fantastic attention getting feats in answer to prayer." But Jesus rejected those temptations and chose the cross as the way that God's grace, love and mercy would be most clearly revealed.

As I contemplate the appalling reality of Christ's suffering and death on the cross, it's difficult to see how God could be there at all. When I see Christ crucified what I see is apparently pointless suffering by a God forsaken man. What makes it all the more appalling is that this God forsaken man is a good man - a man who trusted God - a man who cried out to God in prayer. How could God possibly be there? Yet I believe, in contradiction to all experience and appearance, that God is most clearly revealed in the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ presents us with a choice and forces us to a decision. I choose to seek and find God not in miraculously answered prayer but in the apparent defeat and abandonment of the cross (amidst so many unanswered prayers of his disciples). God does deliver us with an outstretched arm - the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross. And in the bread and wine, the crucified and risen Christ is present with us this morning in a hidden way. He offers himself in answer to our prayers. I pray that my friend may also seek and find God's grace revealed in a hidden way in the apparent defeat and abandonment of his son, David, amidst so many unanswered prayers?

Let us pray: Bloody Lord, you are just too real. Blood is sticky, repulsive, frightening. We do not want to be stuck with a sacrificial God who bleeds. We want a spiritual faith about spiritual things, things bloodless and abstract. We want sacrificial spirits, not sacrificed bodies. But you have bloodied us with your people Israel and your Son, Jesus. We fear that be being Jesus' people we too might have to bleed with others and for others. If such is our destiny, we pray that your will, not ours, be done. Amen.