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THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

LAM. 3:22-32

The words of this text are meant for people in pain, people whose knees are about to buckle and collapse beneath a crushing load of affliction. To such they issue this order:

Strengthen Your Feeble Knees

I. *As you ponder God's mercy*

A. It is constant. Not like our love, moody, changeable, so dependent upon love in return. God's love to us does not depend upon our lukewarm, unsteady love to Him. God didn't wait for men to become His friends before He sent His Son to live, die, and rise for them. St. Paul tells us that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners and enemies of God. Or think of the law of gravity. This law applies in our lives whether we are faithful to God's commands or not.

B. It is everlasting ("never ceases," v. 22). The Hebrew word for mercy is רַחֲמִים , covenant love, the love of a husband to his wife (Ezek. 16). Of that love God said the everlasting mountains would depart before His covenant kindness would leave His people.

C. It is new (v. 23). For each day's difficulties and distresses a fresh supply of mercy. But it is always today's mercy for today's burdens. God does not believe in building up huge surpluses of strength. Of course you cannot take tomorrow's sufferings today. You do not have tomorrow's mercy. But it will be there, tomorrow, when you need it.

In this verse the word for mercies signifies the mercy of a mother, the tenderness of a mother's love and care.

II. *As you ponder God's faithfulness (v. 23)*

A. He is completely faithful. Remember that He declared: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life"? That is what God has promised, and He has always faithfully kept His promises. On the cross God was faithful to death for us. Throughout all those Old Testament ages God kept promising He would one day rescue men from the clutches of Satan, hell, death, and sin. And at last He kept that promise when Jesus, His dear Son, died on Calvary and then burst in glory from His grave. By these acts God was faithful to death for us, and by that divine faithfulness we have forgiveness and eternal joy and glory.

B. He will never abandon His faithfulness. Paul tells us that God must remain faithful; He cannot deny Himself. What a comfort this is to us when we deny Him by our unfaithfulness. As our guilty consciences plague us we should remember: "Though I have shamefully denied Him, He cannot deny Himself. He must abide faithful to His Word, His promise to pardon us for the sake and sacrifice of Jesus, His Son."

III. *As you remember that God Himself is your Lot (v. 24, "Portion")*

Cf. Gen. 15:1, where God promises to be Abraham's reward. If God Himself, the great eternal God, is our Reward, our Lot, our Possession, we have all the wealth and treasure in the world though suffering meets us at every turn. Could you have a greater treasure than the Almighty Himself? Cf. Ps. 73: 25, 26, where the chastised poet comes to the conclusion that though the prosperous wicked have wealth and no woe, he himself has suf-

fering plus God, and this makes him richer than all the prosperous, pain-free wicked in the world.

IV. *By hoping in the Lord*

A. "Hoping" and "waiting" here are synonyms. Both suggest two things.

1. Certainty. Cf. Ps. 130:5, 6, where waiting for God is likened to a watchman waiting for the morning. He is sure it will come. There is no doubt about it. And even so we must wait for our delivering God. We are sure He will come to set us free from every ache and agony. It is never, "Will He?" but rather, "When will He?"

2. Endurance. While we wait we are full of endurance. The Bible idea of patience is not simply this: "Grin and bear it." It is not submitting to God merely because "He is bigger and tougher than we are, and we wouldn't win anyway in a struggle against Him." Rather the Bible idea of patience is the endurance of a mother in childbirth. (a) There is joy and agony at the same time. The pain of childbirth is there, yet it is full of joy because this very pain gives promise of a joy soon to come. (b) The mother in travail realizes that her very suffering is the herald of near deliverance. And so it is with us in our affliction. (Rom. 8:22 ff.)

B. God is good to those who wait for Him. Indeed, He is. For such waiters receive wings (Is. 40:30, 31). Such waiters receive God's forgiveness. (Ps. 130:7, 8; cf. James 1:2, 12)

V. *By remembering that GOD has laid the yoke upon you (v. 27)*

A. Not a cruel and blind fate, a hostile society, a leering, laughing devil, but your loving heavenly Father has allowed the yoke of suffering to be placed about your neck.

B. Therefore

1. Take comfort; it must be for your good. It is like this: Our life is like a rug which the gracious God is weaving. We are look-

ing at this rug from the bottom side where very often we see only many snarled and twisted lines. God, the Weaver, looks at the rug of our life from on top, and He sees the beautiful pattern that He is weaving. The yoke is for our good. This is implied in v. 27, which says that God puts the yoke on us in our youth. Are you old and hoary haired? You are still in your youth in the eyes of your Father in heaven. You are still a youth being prepared by divine discipline for the mature years, the old age of eternity. (Cf. Heb. 12:5 ff.)

2. Sit in silence (v. 28). (a) This implies patience and a lack of complaint. No grumbling, whining, or rebellion. (b) You can, as you remember that since your loving Father in heaven has placed the yoke upon you, He knows best how long to leave it on. You can be sure that you won't shed one more tear, you won't have one more gray hair than is vitally necessary for your temporal and eternal profit. You can sit in silence as you remember the silent sufferer Christ Jesus, who endured the agony of the cross without complaint that you might be spared eternal sorrow.

3. Submit to your Father's will (v. 29). Putting one's mouth to the dust implies reverence to a superior. It is uncomplaining submission to God's will that is stressed here. You can do it as you remember that God didn't just lick the dust for you, but Christ lay in the dust of the grave for three days and then rose again to rescue you from hell's agony for heaven's joy. In that joyous thought strengthen your feeble knees.

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

PSALM 1

This psalm calls us to a decision:

Tree or Chaff? The Choice Is Yours

I. *Let's look first at the tree*

This is not a literal tree but a man, and

A. He is a happy man. The psalm starts off, "*Blessed* is the man." This means happy, prosperous. And since this is precisely what all of us want to be, we had better pay close attention to this poem.

B. Happy is the man

1. Who stubbornly and steadfastly fights sin's ugly progression indicated by the verbs in v. 1: "walk, stand, sit." I do not have to tell you how a sin once committed gradually becomes a habit which you continue to tell yourself you'll break—tomorrow. At first you just walk with a sinful practice, just have sweet company with it for a while. Then before you know it, you're standing with that sin. It has become more and more a part of you. And at last you're sitting in the lap of that evil habit. It possesses you constantly and completely.

As you remember that Jesus Christ once walked to the cross for your salvation, God helps you stop walking and flirting with sin. As you reflect that Christ Jesus stood with a torn and bleeding back before Pilate to pay for your guilt, you can stop standing in your sin. As you ponder that Jesus Christ sat for three days in the jail of death and then broke from that prison on Easter, you can stop sitting in your sin. For the happy man is the person who nips sin in the bud.

2. Who engages in a lot of meditation (v. 2). The Hebrew word for Law here means literally "instruction." God's Law is His teaching to us, and obviously what God gives us is the truth. This isn't merely a collection of true and correct statements but for us it is a living person, Jesus of Galilee, who once said, "I am the Truth." In a real sense Christ is God's living "Law" to us, His instruction and teaching in our flesh and blood, and this is what He teaches:

a. "In my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a room for you." And He did, by His Passion, death, and resur-

rection. Now He's preparing you for that heavenly room by every second of your life, be it pleasant or painful.

b. "This one command I leave with you, that you love one another as I have loved you." Only a converted and quickened Christian will love people as the Lord Jesus has loved him.

3. Who is fruitful and productive. (V. 3)

a. The happy man is like a tree. A tree, of course, is considerably more stable and permanent than chaff, which represents the godless. Thus to resist sin's progressive hold, to meditate in God's instruction, is to bring your life a stability no sin could ever offer.

b. The happy man is a *planted* tree, that is, he isn't growing by these nourishing brooks naturally; he was planted there by God, the divine Gardener. (Cf. Rom. 11)

c. The happy man is planted by flowing brooks (v. 3). Christ calls Himself the Water of life. Rooted and grounded in Him by faith, we indeed bear the fruit of a righteous life.

d. The happy man bears *seasonal* fruit (v. 3). We ought not expect a premature harvest of perfection. For as Holy Scripture often points out, we are never in a state of arrival, we are always in a state of becoming. We strive and struggle, yet never quite reach the goal. The righteous man brings forth his fruit in his season. This means there ought never to be an overdue crop either. Actually it is always fruit-bearing time for the Christian. We are living in a perpetual autumn, the short moment before our own death or our Lord's return, when the harvest will be gathered. Do you want to be a fruitful tree? Then you must think often of a tree, the tree of the cross and the Christ who hung there for your salvation. This is God's power to help you bear an abundant crop of righteousness.

e. The happy man is eternally green (v. 3). You know, of course, why your

leaves will be everlastingly green, why you are a tree that will never die. It is because Christ died on a tree to atone for all your guilt, for your frequent fruitless living. Because Christ hung upon that tree, you are an evergreen, an eternally green tree. You will live forever.

f. The happy man is always prosperous (v. 3). Is he now? What about all those afflictions and sorrows? We realize, of course, that suffering is only the pruning shears which our loving God uses on us living trees to make us more fruitful.

g. The happy man's life is known by God (v. 6). Obviously this is more than an intellectual awareness. This is rather like the knowledge of the marriage relationship. God knows us as a husband loves his wife, cares and provides for her. And you know what your heavenly husband's wedding present to you is, the gift of His own Son for your salvation. God knows you. Yes, He counts each hair on your head and has carved you on the palm of His hand. He knows you when you sit down and when you stand up. What a comfort!

II. *Now let's look at the chaff (v. 4)*

A. The chaff won't stand. (V. 5)

1. In God's judgment. Who will? Only those who now fall, fall humbly before Christ and His cross, seeking forgiveness and salvation through Jesus, will stand acquitted on the Day of Judgment.

2. In the congregation of saints. There will be a separation of wheat and chaff at the end of time. Now we cannot be sure who are the lip worshipers and who are the heart believers. Then we shall know. Now it is weeds and wheat together, hypocrites together with true believers. At the end of time there will be a final separation. "O Jesus, great living Grain of wheat, who didst fall into the ground and die and rise again for our pardon and everlasting bliss,

help us be genuine wheat and not just weeds that look like wheat."

B. The chaff will perish (v. 6). What does one do with chaff? Burn it.

Tree or chaff? The choice, Christian, is yours.

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Is. 62:6-12

These words speak to us about:

Watchmen on the Wall

I. *This is the background for these words.*

They are addressed to Israel languishing in the Babylonian Captivity. To the few left in Palestine God announces He has stationed watchmen on Jerusalem's walls, who cry to God without rest or letup.

II. *And this is what those watchmen shout:*

A. "Lord, remember Your promises (vv. 6, 7 a). Lord, you must come to our rescue. You must bring back our enslaved brothers from Babylon and restore our fortunes here. You must, Lord, because You promised it." Can we be like this?

1. Yes, we can. No rest for the wicked? Rather no rest for the holy God until He hears and grants our prayers. And He wants us to bother Him with our prayers. He wants us to be relentless in our requests. He wants us to be like that needy widow who kept pestering the judge in the famous story told by Jesus, until the judge relented and helped the widow in her need. We have to be careful, however, that like those watchmen on Jerusalem's walls we ask God to fulfill His *promises* to Israel. They weren't asking Him to satisfy and gratify their own selfish passions. We must bear that in mind when we would give God no rest by our prayers. Are we sure that we're asking Him to do what He promised? For the purpose of prayer is not to mold and shape God's will to fit ours.

Rather it's the other way around. The purpose of prayer is not to have God do our bidding, but rather to drive something out of us, our own selfishness and a will that runs contrary to the Lord.

2. But is this really our problem that we are bothering God too much by our prayers? I fear that the collect is often tragically correct, namely, that God is always far more ready to hear than we are to ask.

B. Get ready, God is coming (vv. 10-12). The poet here envisions God leading the exiles home from Babylon. A way must be prepared through the desert. In the 40th chapter of his prophecy Isaiah describes this highway preparation in greater detail. The road must be made level, straight, and smooth for the anticipated coming of God and the exiles.

God is coming. You and I hear that same message. God is coming in Christ to pronounce the eternal sentence upon all men. Therefore the road must be ready, the highways of our hearts must be prepared. The crookedness of sin must go. The bumps, the ups and down of inconsistent Christian behavior, the mountains of pride and the valleys of despair, all must be removed so that our hearts are ready for the coming of the King.

C. Lift up the ensign. It is interesting to note here that the word for ensign in v. 10 is the same word used to describe the pole on which Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the desert. And how the Israelites bitten by the poisonous snakes flocked to that pole, that ensign for healing and life! Jesus once compared Himself to that uplifted snake on the pole; thus His cross is our ensign. For even as the ensign, the rallying flag in our text, signaled to the Jews that they should come back home to Jerusalem since the captivity was over, so our ensign, the cross of Jesus, beckons us to come home, home to heaven. For by that cross and the Christ who hung there for us, all is forgiven and God

takes us back to His arms of love and to His home above. God is coming. Indeed, He is, coming in Christ to be the Judge of the living and the dead. Therefore, lift high the rallying flag, the Cross. For where else shall we go but to the Cross? To whom else shall we flee for acquittal from our sins and safety from God's wrath against sin but to the Christ who suffered the cross and God's wrath for our salvation?

D. God will not be cheated of His spoil. (Vv. 11, 12)

1. The picture here is this: God is in battle with Babylon. God wins the war and will not be cheated of His booty, that is, His ransomed people. The returning Israelites are God's reward for winning the war with Babylon.

2. And even so it will be with us. On the Last Day God will fight the final decisive battle against all His enemies that now hold us captive: sin, pain, devil, and death. God will win this struggle and will not be cheated of His battle's spoils, namely, you and me. We are the booty God will claim after this battle of the Last Day, the spoil He will bring with Him to the heavenly Palestine. Actually the outcome of this universal conflict has already been decided. It happened on the cross when Jesus shouted the victory cry: "It is finished. I have won the war!"

III. *This is why they shout (v. 8)*

A. The watchmen were so persistent in their prayers because God had sworn to act for His people. He accompanied His promise with an oath.

B. It is vital to note that the keeping of God's promise depends not in any way upon Israel's striving. It was the same with the people's first entrance into, and possession of, Palestine. This didn't happen because Israel deserved or had earned it but because God had sworn to give the land to the patriarchs and to their descendants.

C. It is still gloriously the same with us. What did Jesus say to that dying thief on the cross? "*Truly*, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Christ swore that this sinner would have heaven. Jesus, however, didn't just promise it; He died and then rose again that He might keep that oath. His blood was poured out also to obtain our pardon and eternal life of gladness with God. And aren't we glad it is this way, that heaven depends upon Christ's oath that cannot be broken, rather than upon our holiness which is so often like the fleecy and flying clouds and the glistening summer dew—here for a moment and then quickly gone? "*Truly*, I swear it, you shall be with Me in Paradise." There's no doubt about it.

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY
AFTER TRINITY

JER. 23:16-29

There's a warning in these words:

Beware of False Prophets

I. *It's difficult to practice this caution and alertness because when we think of false prophets we immediately have others in mind.*

A. A false prophet fills one with empty hopes.

1. Is this true of some of our political prophets? One tells us: "Don't worry, we have all the rockets and bombers we need to deter the Russians from a sneak attack." And we are filled with hope. Along comes another prophet and says: "We're woefully unprepared and wide open to atomic attack." And our hopes are dashed.

2. But let's look at ourselves. How easy it is for us to fill ourselves with false hope, to dodge, avoid, and ignore the truth, the grim facts of life and sin and death, and then to buoy and build up our confidence with empty hopes grounded only upon what we

want and would like to be true rather than upon what we know to be the facts. And thus we play the role of a false prophet to ourselves.

B. A false prophet speaks the visions of his own mind rather than the clear words of God. (Vv. 16, 18, 21, 22, 26)

1. A false prophet, then, is one who speaks and operates on the basis of what he thinks or feels, on the shaky and shifting basis of his own personal convictions and conclusions rather than upon the clear Word of God.

2. And don't we often do that? We often feel that we aren't forgiven, that God has forsaken us in suffering, that He doesn't love us. We often feel that we can't make it or do this or that. We feel and believe we're better or worse than we are, healthier or sicker than we are, and before we know it our feelings have become the facts in our own upset and deceived mind. What we're doing is speaking, thinking, and living by the visions of our own mind rather than by God's clear and sure Word. Would that we might know, trust, and follow that Word more and better than the devil-inspired bible of our own feelings.

C. A false prophet confirms people in their sins (v. 17). Do I have to remind you here of that false prophet inside each one of us who constantly comforts us in our sins, lulls our pricking conscience to sleep with words like these: "Go ahead and do it, no one knows or cares. Besides, everyone is doing it, and God? Well, He can't really be so serious about His threats to punish. After all, look at how often you've done this sin and gotten by with it before. Life is still comfortably the same, isn't it?" And the tragedy is we often listen to the voice of this false prophet within.

D. A false prophet completely misunderstands God's thinking. (Vv. 23, 24)

1. A false prophet fails to remember that God is a near God, near both to observe sin

and to punish it and also near to love and forgive, rescue and bless. Do we sometimes forget that? "God isn't around, therefore I'll sneak in this sin." You are a false prophet when you think like that. "God isn't around. My sin has driven Him far off, and therefore He can't forgive me." "God isn't around. My afflictions have cast Him off from me. He isn't close enough to help and deliver me." We are false prophets when we think like this.

2. A false prophet fails to remember that God is a far-off God. No matter how near we are to Him, how much we know about Him, He's still far off, way beyond our best knowledge and understanding. He keeps His divine distance. He doesn't owe us an explanation for His mysterious and painful acts in our lives or His strange dealings in the world. He doesn't owe us anything but a fiery hell for our sins. Yet He gives us His own Son, Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again that our debts to God, our sins, might be pardoned and we might go to an undeserved heaven.

E. A false prophet overestimates his own ability. He thinks he is shrewd enough to hide from God. (V. 24)

Do you try to hide yourself from the Lord, hide in the secret places of your private sins known only to you? Do you try to hide in the secret places of your feeble and empty excuses? You didn't know any better? You aren't as bad as so and so. You didn't have a chance—very poor home surroundings, improper upbringing—and therefore really you are not to blame for your faults and sins. Your parents and environment are. But you see, God judges and condemns people and not environments. There's only one secret place where we can hide with our sins from God and that is the secret place God Himself has built, Christ, our Savior. In Him and on Him God laid your sins, and therefore we shout: Yes, Lord, there is a secret place in

which you cannot see us as sinners. That place is Christ, who died and rose to take our sins away.

II. *Because false and true prophets have no fellowship (v. 28)*

A. The picture here is this: False prophets are strong, true prophets are weak, and the two do not belong together.

B. Even so it must be with us. We must get rid of the false prophet within, that devilish voice which would overcome and drown out the divine. We must get rid of the straw and become pure wheat.

C. But this is impossible this side of the grave. Here we'll always be wheat and straw at the same time, both false and true prophets simultaneously.

D. But we can become purer wheat and less straw. This happens as we reflect upon Jesus, the living Grain of wheat, who fell into the ground on Good Friday and then sprang up again on Easter for our salvation. We can become purer wheat as we eat more, the bread of His Word. We can become purer wheat as we work like wheat harvesters, for St. Paul has told us: Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling in the constant recognition that God is the One who works both the will and the actual doing of His good pleasure.

III. *Because their faith is destruction (vv. 19, 20)*

A. False prophets are doomed men. The tornado of God's wrath will one day hit down upon them and whirl them into a fiery eternity.

B. Then what about us who have so much of the false prophet within? Our only hope for deliverance from this coming storm of God's wrath is *the* Prophet, Jesus Christ, who has endured and suffered this tornado of God's anger in our place for our pardon and eternal safety. How this fact should inspire us all the more to squelch and stifle the false prophet within!

THE NINTH SUNDAY
AFTER TRINITY

PROV. 16:1-9

Briefly stated the emphasis of these Bible words is this:

He's in Control

I. *Man proposes, but God disposes*

This fact is stressed at both the beginning and the end of the text. (Vv. 1,9)

A. This is not fatalism, an assumption that, no matter what you do or fail to do, whatever will be will be. We are not just helpless pawns.

B. It is rather this:

1. Confidence that God has worked out your life for you to achieve the best possible for you in this life and in the life to come. (Rom. 8:28)

2. Within God's plan for us there is much room for us to exercise sanctified (that is, Spirit-controlled and directed) common sense and caution.

II. *God is in Control*

Who is?

The text answers, Jahweh. This is the Old Testament name for the God of the covenant, the God who loved Israel like a husband and a father. It is this husband-and-father God who is shaping and guiding our life and destiny, not a capricious and cruel fate, not a wicked world or a malicious devil. It is our heavenly husband and father, and He has promised, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

III. *Therefore deceivers won't get by (v.2)*

People with pure exteriors and corrupt hearts, the outwardly polished and pretty graves that house within all manner of death and decay, these people cannot escape the Lord who weighs their spirit in the balanced

scales of His righteousness and judgment. And He alone reserves that right of judgment. Therefore:

A. We should not judge others, especially when such judgment is sometimes silly. How can people with logs in their eyes see to judge the sawdust particle in the eyes of another?

B. We shouldn't even judge ourselves. (Cf. 1 Cor. 4:5,6)

C. The reasons are clear.

1. The final trial hasn't started. It won't until Jesus, the Judge, returns. (1 Cor. 4:5,6)

2. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1)

IV. *Therefore stop worrying (v.3; cf. Ps. 37:5)*

A. You know what worry is. Peter tells us it is pride, that is, the refusal to let God discharge a responsibility which is His alone, namely, the care and government of our future (1 Peter 5:6,7). One humbles himself under God's hand by throwing all his worries on the Lord.

B. There is a difference between worry and God-intended preparation for the future. This is a good prayer: "Lord, help me to achieve and change those things within my power and abilities, to leave to You those things that are out of my hands and control, and then give me the wisdom to discern between them."

C. You can as you remember this: "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things!" The gift of Christ is God's promise to give you everything else you need. God started with the biggest and the best gift, His own Son for your salvation. Surely He will always give you the lesser gifts of food and clothes and life's other necessities.

V. *God controls even wickedness (v. 5)*

A. The wickedness in this world. When we get upset and frightened over the apparently uncontrolled advance and activities of evil in our world, it is well to remember that the potter still controls the clay, not the other way around. And this is true whether the vessels be those fitted for glory or for wrath (Rom. 9:19 ff.). Cf. also Ps. 2.

B. The sin in your life (v. 6). Whose loyalty and faithfulness are referred to here, God's or man's? In keeping with the host of Scripture references which insist on

Christ's sacrifice as the sole atonement for sin, we shall take these words as a reference to God's mercy and faithfulness so clearly shown in the sending of Jesus to be our Savior. By the loyalty and faithfulness of Calvary, iniquity is atoned for.

C. The enemies who would harm you (v. 7). They will see how foolish it is to fight against God. And what does Paul say? "If God be for us, who can be against us?" And He is for us, so much so that He was once against Christ, His own Son, on a cross that He might be with us and for us forever.

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