

In Nomine Iesu

Midweek 3 - Advent

The making of a theologian of the cross: affliction – Ephesians 6:10-20

Luke, the companion of Paul on his missionary journeys, also accompanied him to Rome for his trial before the emperor. He recorded their arrival there, “When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier that guarded him.” (Acts 28:16) A few verses later, Luke concluded the Book of Acts with these words, “[Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” (Acts 28:30-31)

At some point in those two years Paul wrote the words of our text, in which he touched on all three things Martin Luther many years later would cite as necessary for the making of a theologian of the cross. But before we go on, let’s ask, what is a theologian of the cross? Martin Luther wrote, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God **hidden in suffering**. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people the apostle calls ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ [Philippians 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works.” (*Heidelberg Disputation 1518, Article 21*)

Many modern-day preachers are not theologians of the cross, but theologians of glory, that is, they proclaim a Christ who is not the crucified One, but is supposed to be an example of success and prosperity. But they are not worth listening to, so let us turn back to Paul, who truly was a theologian of the cross.

As he remained in his rented room under house arrest, Paul used the image of the Roman soldier he must have seen and contemplated every day, complete with his belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword to picture for us how to be followers of Christ, **urging us**: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength **of his might**. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. **For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood**, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, **and also for me**, - for Paul was on trial

for his life - that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Paul’s warning to us all is that our struggle as Christians in this world is not one that is chiefly against flesh and blood, that is, against other people, against the things that we can see, but against that which we cannot see. It is a struggle against spiritual forces of evil. Such forces often are part of the affliction that comes upon us, and causes us to suffer.

Naturally, we would all prefer not to suffer for being Christians. We would prefer not to be imprisoned and in danger of execution for being Christians, as Paul was. But, you see, here is the truth of the matter we have heard about the last two Wednesdays. Whereas we surely can determine to pray (*oratio*) more fervently and frequently and meditate (*meditation*) on God’s word more often and deeply, we have no control over the third thing necessary for a theologian of the cross, affliction. Paul did not try to be stoned, beaten with rods three times, or scourged five times with 40 lashes minus one. He did not try to be shipwrecked, enduring a day and a night alone in the midst of the sea, or imprisoned, or executed. No, those were the afflictions God allowed to come upon him in the course of his ministry.

In the same way, God may allow affliction to come upon you, whether through family, through those you thought were your friends, through sickness ... however it comes

upon you. The point is this, as both St. Paul and Martin Luther knew, God allows affliction to come upon you so that you grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, and you come to understand ever more deeply that you will love your life, this life, so that you do not love it with all its wonders and glories, because, despite its appearances, life here in this fallen world is not your friend. It is not your friend, because here you must contend with the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh which will use your life against you.

Consider Paul and his afflictions. Did his afflictions make him a better theologian, a true theologian of the cross? They certainly did. Think of what we just read. Paul lived under house arrest for two years, always guarded by the Roman soldier, a sight he saw every day, and put to good use for us. Also in those two years, as Luke tells us, many people came to see him and hear him. He welcomed them all. Do you think they left wiser than they came? More certain of their salvation? In other words, did God use the afflictions He allowed to come upon Paul to make him a better preacher and teacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ? A greater blessing to others? I think we can say, yes.

You may not have the vocation of Paul as a teacher of God's word; but if in your vocation, if God adds to your prayer and meditation affliction and thus makes you a theologian of the cross, gives you deeper understanding of what life is and who Jesus Christ is, will you not become a father or mother better able to make your children or grandchildren wise in the way of righteousness? Will He not make you a better neighbor or friend to those around

you, whose lives touch yours? And so, cause you to be a greater blessing to all who come to you, all whom you welcome into your life? And at the same time greatly comfort and strengthen you on your heavenward walk?

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The Bible does not tell us anything about Paul's death, but well-founded tradition holds that he was executed by strangulation during the reign of Nero in 64 A.D. And we may assume with confidence that the prayers Paul requested from God's people: "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly," were granted him as he walked to his death. And still more were blessed by God through him. For, you see, affliction is not a sign that God has forsaken you; no, it is the very opposite. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria