

Psalm 77; Romans 5.1-11; Acts 7.54-60  
In Suffering Be Thy Love My Peace  
The Wednesday after *Judica*  
10 April 2019, 1900 hours  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Turn with me in your hymnbook to page 257.

We've been praying this prayer each Wednesday evening during Lent. The last one there. Let's read it aloud together.

Tonight, as we take up the stoning to death of St. Stephen, I'd like to focus on those last two petitions. "Abide with us when the night of affliction and temptation comes upon us, the night of fear and despair, the night when death draws near. Abide with us and with all the faithful, now and forever."

The very first rule of Christian prayer is that you speak back to God and ask Him for what He has promised to give.

So let's get that out of the way right away.

Has God ever made such a promise to you, that He will abide with you now and forever?

That He will be with you in the night of death, in the midst of affliction, temptation, fear, and despair?

How do you answer that?

With a resounding Yes.

Yes. And to select only a few such passages in God's Word, how about this? Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me." Or how about Hebrews 13: "He will never leave you nor forsake you." And then we have Christ's explicit promise—the promise of our Immanuel, "God-with-Us," "Lo! I am with you always even to the end of the age." Who also said, "They will never perish; no one will snatch them out of My hand."

And so it is that in this prayer we pray for the Lord's abiding presence with us through His holy Word and Sacrament, firmly trusting His promises. Firmly confessing that the Lord Jesus Christ who died for us is with even us in our dying. That the Lord Jesus Christ who was laid in the grave is our God even in our own grave. That the Lord Jesus Christ who rose again from the dead will also waken us from death to everlasting life. That's our prayer. That's our confession. That's our faith.

But if that's so, then how could that "night when death draws near" possibly be such a thing of affliction, temptation, fear, and despair?

It's because it's a night of attack by Satan. A night when your flesh can't bear and refuses to believe God's promises. A night when you realize that the wages of sin is not only death, but eternal death. A night when you seem to yourself beyond all rescue.

And that's because right then and there all of God's promises have every appearance of being for naught. And we begin to cry with the psalmist, "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has His steadfast love forever ceased? Are His promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His compassion?"

Because that's exactly what it seems. He's promised life, and here I suffer death. He's promised me the forgiveness of my sins. And here I stand at the cosmic cash register paying out my sins' wages in death. He's promised me rescue from the devil. And here I see and know and am conscious of nothing but the work of the inveterate killer of men, Satan himself. And he's not killing someone else. He's killing *me*.

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This'll be last time you'll hear it in our Lenten series, but it bears repeating again and again: Christian suffering takes place in the gap between hope and lived reality. Which is to say, Christian suffering takes place between two words. The Word of God, which gives nothing but promises. And the word spun out of the catechism of devil, world, and flesh, which teaches nothing but despair. That's where the Christian life is lived. Between Divine Promise and Satanic sermon. And if that's where it is lived, that's exactly where it ends. Between the promise of life and the reality of death.

So what's a Christian to do? What are *you* to do?

Back to prayer.

Pray the 2<sup>nd</sup> Petition over and over and over again: "Thy kingdom come." "God's kingdom comes when He gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we may believe His holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and there in eternity."

That's exactly what God granted the psalmist—His Holy Spirit, to believe His Holy Word. And that's the hinge on which the whole psalm turn. Take a look. Verse 10. "Then I said, 'I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.' I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember Your wonders of old."

That's where you can see God's promises. In His objective works. And for the psalmist, looking back, those deeds and words and works of old were the great salvation and rescue of Israel from their misery and captivity in Egypt.

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But now, hear this. In these last times, God has spoken to us by His Son.

If the death of the firstborn in Egypt was the release lever for Pharaoh the oppressor to let the LORD's people go,

the death of the Only-Begotten Son was far greater. For it sets free from Satan the oppressor.

If the rescue from Egypt was mighty,

mightier yet is the rescue from sin and death by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

If the salvation God worked through the water of the Red Sea drowned all the enemies of His people,

what enemy of yours—be it sin, be it death, be it devil—can have survived the water poured over your head in the Triune Name of God to harm you?

If a slaughtered lamb and its blood were food and sign of deliverance,

how much more the slaughter of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and His blood?

And if the Lord resided with His people in cloud by day and fire by night,

how much more will He be with you even in death whose residence is not cloud and fire,  
but your own flesh and blood?

When the night of death comes, that's where hope is anchored: in the blood of Christ, through whom  
and by which we have been reconciled to the Father.

And that preaches its own sermon. It says with Paul that because I have been justified by faith I am at  
peace. Maybe not at peace with what's happening to me. But certainly at peace with God, and through  
the blood of Jesus. It means that all the Satanic lies preached in my death are just that—lies. My death  
doesn't mean I'm God's enemy, or He mine. Because I have been made right with God through the  
blood of Jesus. My death doesn't mean that I'm falling under God's wrath and that there's nothing left  
for me but despair. Because if I've been justified, I will be saved. And my death doesn't mean the end.  
Because my Jesus lives. My Jesus who's made me His through my Baptism into His death and  
resurrection. My Jesus who daily and richly forgives me all my sins. My Jesus who gives me His holy Body  
and Blood as the medicine of eternal life. My Jesus in whom I have the hope of the glory of God. Who, in  
fact, *is* the glory of God.

My Jesus. And no less yours. My Jesus. And who, standing at the right hand of God in all His glory,  
received the spirit of St. Stephen to Himself. And who will one day receive yours.

God's objective works for me. And for you.

That is God's great love in Christ—and in your suffering, your peace.

Amen.

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