

How Then Can We Live

3/20/22

SJN

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Old Testament reading where we hear these words once more: "And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?' (Ezekiel 33:10) This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.

The people... were listening. And that's a good thing. The prophet had done his job and preached all the words that the Lord God put into his mouth. Words of Law... words that convicted them of their transgressions and sins... not that there's any real difference between the two. Call it whatever you like... just don't call it 'okay' or 'acceptable' or 'not as bad as it could be, 'or 'something you can live with.'

The prophet didn't give them any 'wiggle room.' No chance to blame it all on the government – "did you hear about what Pilate did? If only we had a better government." And no chance to blame it all on God – "did you hear about those 18 people who died when the tower in Siloam collapsed on them? If we only had a better God."

Every time they tried to wiggle out of their guilt, he'd say something like, "But unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

And... they listened. That's good... because not everyone does... do they, beloved?. So many people let the warning to repent go in one ear and out the other... without it ever making a connection in between, if you know what I mean. They say, 'it's not that bad,' or 'it could be worse' or 'I can live with it.' They shift the blame onto the government... society... parents... spouses... peers; you name it... even God. 'But it's not my fault.

But Israel listened... and the Law did its job... and they were convicted of their guilt. "You are the man!" And they confessed. They didn't deny... but confessed. "Surely our transgressions and sins are... upon us..." Not upon someone else or something else... upon us.

“And we rot away because of them.” Their guilt was ‘eating them up.’ Another translation might be to ‘decay’, or ‘fester’. They’re guilt before God was like gangrene or leprosy or cancer.

When we talk about ‘guilt’ we usually talk in two different ways. First, there’s ‘objective’ guilt... this would be what the judge pronounces on the guilty person. “I find you guilty of....” such and such a crime. “Objective” guilt is about the particular line you have transgressed... the particular sin that you have committed... the particular law you have broken... or as I mentioned last week regarding the school... the specific rule that has been violated. That is what Israel meant when they said, “Surely our transgressions and sins are upon us.”

We confess that we have crossed the line that God has drawn. We are guilty of particular crimes against God.

- We have had – and still have - other gods besides Him.
- We have misused the name of the Lord.
- We do not honor the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
- We do not honor our parents... and other authorities.
- We murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, covet... and oh my... do we sinners covet!

And in our sin it is not just ‘in general.’ If you asked the person... they’d give you the specifics of how they have sinned against God and against man. That... is ‘objective’ guilt.

But when they say, “... we rot away because of them,”... they’re talking about ‘subjective’ guilt. That’s the guilty feeling that sits in the pit of the stomach... and it hangs over you like a dark cloud... as eats away at you.

‘Subjective’ guilt is that unwelcome visitor that moves into your life and demands your attention... and it will not be silenced no matter how many drugs or drinks or affairs you try to shut it up or drive it out with. No matter how you try to escape it... there it is... always having a way of finding you.

Guilt is so very powerful, friends. Such a powerful thing, in fact... that has its own way of controlling us. Or at least, tries to. It will turn you into a monster... or a coward... or a recluse. It’ll coil you in so tightly... that you won’t be able to face the one you’ve sinned against... either man or God.

It causes families to ‘rot away’... marriages to ‘decay,’... friendships to ‘fester.’

Guilt is like a cage... it captures its victim and drains away his courage to be brave... to be bold... and to do what is good and right and loving... and enjoy genuine satisfaction and contentment and joy from life.

Guilt is always right there saying,

- 'Do you remember what you did – you should be ashamed.'
- 'Have you forgotten your sin? Don't you know you have no right to be happy or content... or enjoy the spouse and the children and the friends and the work that God has given you.'
- 'Whatever you do... be careful that no one is ever able to see what a hypocrite and pathetic person you really are. Always be pretending to be who you are not.'

This is what Israel meant when it said, "Surely our transgressions and sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them." Their guilt was eating them up... their love was 'decaying'... and their faith was 'festering.' No wonder they were like a 'fruitless vine,' and "like a fig tree that yields no figs."

And so the question they were asking was, "How then can we live?" Because this... this was certainly not 'living'. This was 'dying.' And they hated it. And so they didn't want to continue to 'rot away' like this. They were weary of despair. "How then... can we live?"

It's a question that many people continue to ask. A lot of people are dying to live. A lot of people are tired of 'rotting away' in guilt's prison and want to be free. "How then... can we live?"

And the Lord God listens. And that is very good... that the Lord God is listening when His people cry out to Him, "how then can we live?"

That is a question that the Lord God loves to hear from His people. How can the dying... live? How can the prisoner be set free? And the God of all Creation responds, "I thought you'd never ask."

He answers their question with a question, "why will you die?" It's like someone who says, "I'm dying of thirst, how can I live"... while he's sitting right next to a stream of cool, clear water. Or someone who says, "I'm starving to death, how can I live,"... while standing in front of an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Or... "Our transgressions and sins are upon us, and we rot away. How then can we live?"... and you're standing before the author of life... who knows how to raise the dead... and set the captives free.

“Say to them, ‘As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked... but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back... turn back from your evil ways... for why will you die, O house of Israel?’”

God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ into this world for you... to take your transgressions and sins and the guilt that festers in you... away from you... and bear them in Himself - in His own body - all the way to the cross and to the grave.

And there... it dies in Him... nothing to hold onto. “Why... will you die?”

Only believe this and you will live.
Only believe this and you will be free.

Isn't it interesting, brothers and sisters... that when God brought His people out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt... He established sacraments to deal - not just with their sin - but also with the guilt of their sin. Of all of the various offerings and sacrifices He established for His people... the two most significant... were the ‘sin offering,’ ... and the ‘guilt offering.’

They were two, separate sacrifices that required the blood of an innocent lamb or goat. The ‘sin offering’ absolved the ‘objective guilt.’ And the ‘guilt offering’ set the sinner free from the grip of his ‘subjective guilt’ that caused his faith and love to ‘rot away.’

So when the prophet Isaiah found himself before the Lord in the heavenly temple... and then realized just how sinful he was... he pronounced the divine curse upon himself, “woe is me... for I am undone.”

His guilt left him incapacitated... until one of the angels flew to him and touched his lips with one of the coals from the altar and said, “why will you die, Isaiah?” “See... your guilt is taken away... your sin is atoned for.” (Is. 6).

And then... set free from his guilt... the prophet says, “Here am I. Send me, send me.” (Is. 6).

Now - in these last days - God has perfected the ‘sin offering’ and the ‘guilt offering’ in the one offering... His Son, Jesus Christ. And so, the question of all who are dying from the guilt that is festering within them, “How then can we live?” is answered in Him. “Why will you die,” ... when you are hidden in the One who has already died for you... and has risen from the dead and gives you ‘life in His name’?

Jesus is the key, friends.... He is the key that unlocks the door of the cage and sets you free. And “If the Son sets you free, then you are free indeed.” The Jews said to Him, “we have never been enslaved to anyone... how can you say that we will be set free.” (John 8:36). But they were slaves... slaves to their guilt because they had sinned. And their guilt was eating them up. “Why will you die?”

So, beloved... “How then can we live?” Believe that Jesus Christ has taken away your sin... and where there is no sin... there is no guilt. “Why will you die?”

Jesus has given the key that unlocks the cage of guilt to His Church. “Whose ever sins you forgive... they are forgiven.”

- Your guilt was washed away in your Baptism and you were set free to live.
- Your guilt was removed from you as far as the east is from the west in the declaration of Absolution – “I forgive you all of your sins...”
- Your guilt was atoned for in the body and blood of Jesus Christ that now ‘touches your lips’ in the Lord’s Supper. “See... Your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for.”

And if you want even more... then I recommend you take advantage of the opportunity for Private Confession and Absolution... where particular sins that are troubling you... and particular guilt is holding you captive... are confessed before the Lord in private with a pastor.

And the pastor’s ears are the ears of God who hears your cry, “I am rotting away.” And his mouth is the mouth of God who speaks His word of forgiveness... and sets you free to live and love and bear much fruit and have great contentment and joy in it all.

“As I live declares the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back... turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” How then can we live? It’s simple... Jesus... and only... Jesus! This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.