

What Can We Expect from God?

Text: Psalm 43:1-2a, 3

1) Defence

Suggested Hymns:

2) Deliverance

70, 173, 84, 51, 176

3) Direction

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is based on the introit for today, Psalm 43:1-2a, 3, ¹ *Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!* ² *For You are the God of my strength; ...* ³ *Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your tabernacle.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Latin term for this Sunday is Judica, which means judge. The first verse can also read, *Judge me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation.* This thought is also expressed in 1 Samuel 24:15, ¹⁵ *Therefore let the LORD be judge, and judge between you and me, and see and plead my case, and deliver me out of your hand.*

Step by step during these Lenten weeks we travel the way that leads to Calvary. The events of redemption — ever old, yet ever new — gradually unfolds before the eyes of faith as we see the Saviour moving steadily, inexorably, toward the climax of the cross.

Upon this great theme of man's redemption all the lessons of these Lenten Sundays are focused. Thus in the Epistle for today the writer to the Hebrews extols Christ as the greater High Priest, who *“with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption,”* and speaks of Him as *“the Mediator of the new covenant.”*¹

Likewise in today's Gospel² our Lord identifies Himself as the eternal Son of God and promises, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.”*

In the Introit for Judica Sunday the psalmist, in moving and poetic words, strikes the same keynote of redemption through the Word and work of Christ. In a clear and convincing way he answers the question that has arisen within the questing heart of man since time began: *What Can We Expect from God?* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. From God We Can Expect Defence

The plea which opens our text is a paradox indeed. The psalmist cries: ***“Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation!”*** In other words, the God whom the psalmist invokes is at the same time the Judge and the Advocate for the defence.

This paradoxical description of God aptly symbolises both the relationship in which we stand toward Him, and also the manner in which He deals with us.

On the one hand, He is our Judge. The picture is well known to us of Christ as the Judge, before whom all the nations will gather on the Last Day, and who will pronounce both the verdict of doom upon the wicked, and of salvation upon the good.³ And in the Apostles’ Creed we confess: *“He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”* In the Old Testament, too, the concept of the Lord as Judge is a familiar one.

Now, there is something curious about God’s activity in judging the Christian. It has taken place as an event of the past; it is a continuing process; and it will occur in the future. All three aspects of God’s judgement are true, and all three combine to present a complete picture of our relationship to Him.

Viewed as a past event, God’s judgement has already been consummated. He has pronounced the verdict of guilt upon all mankind because of the sin by which we have broken His Law and separated ourselves from Him.

This guilt is universal, as St. Paul declares in Romans 3:23, ²³ ***for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***

And this guilt is also individual, for the psalmist laments in Psalm 14:3, ³ ***They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; There is none who does good, No, not one.***

But even as it is a fact of sacred history that God's judgement has been pronounced upon all mankind because of its guilt, it is equally true that God's love has intervened to ward off the execution of His righteous sentence upon a guilty world.

The message of the Lenten Gospel is summarised in Galatians 4:4-5, ***4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.***

And the lesson of the cross is that God ***made Him*** — Christ — ***who knew no sin to be sin for us.***⁴

This, then, is the great truth of the atonement, upon which we meditate with special devotion during these Lenten weeks: God has transferred to His own Son the penalty which we had rightfully incurred because of our sin.

Through His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His victorious resurrection from the grave He has fulfilled the righteous demands of God, removed the cause of His divine wrath, and conquered the evil forces that would bring about our spiritual ruin.

And all of this He has done in our behalf, without any merit or worthiness on our part, out of pure love and mercy toward a lost and sinful race. In this spirit Christ has willingly borne the judgement of God.

Yet, while the imposition of the divine judgement upon sin and the execution of the sentence upon Christ in our stead, the Innocent for the guilty, is an accomplished fact, at the same time it is a continuing process.

The reason for this situation we find in the fact that the benefit of Christ's atonement in our behalf accrues to us only if we receive it in faith. True it is that ***"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself"***⁵ (objective justification), but the individual enters upon this new relationship with God only when he comes to the conviction that this reconciliation truly applies to him (subjective justification).

In a personal way we must acknowledge our sin, in a personal way we must stand repentant before the cross, and in a personal way we must accept Christ's righteousness as our own.

Again, this is not something that we do once and then promptly forget or regard the matter as finished. On the contrary: All through life we are plagued by sin; all through life we bear the weaknesses of our flesh; all through life we continue to fall short of the standards of God. We must echo the lament of St. Paul written in Romans 7:18, ¹⁸ ***For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells.***

And so, insofar as we are sinners — even after our conversion— we must continually seek to escape sin's condemnation, we must continually look to the cross, we must continually avail ourselves of the pardon and the reconciliation that God has promised.

As Luther put it, "*The Christian is at the same time saint and sinner.*" Thus we see that God's judgement upon sin is both a historic fact and an ongoing reality; and by the same token, our forgiveness by God for the sake of His Son is both an accomplished fact and a continuing process.

But furthermore: God's judgement upon sin is not only past, not only present; it is also reserved for the future.

Scripture teaches, by precept and by parable, the inevitable coming of the Day of Judgement. For this day will bring the visible confirmation of the judgement of grace upon the righteous, and the verdict of doom upon the godless. To this final consummation the world is hastening; to its advent the signs of the times are pointing; and for its appearance the children of men are waiting — some with fear, some with hope.

We sing in a great and familiar hymn of the church,⁶

The day is surely drawing near,
When God's Son, the anointed,
Will with great majesty appear,
As judge of all appointed.

And because the Christian can look forward to His coming with the joyful expectancy of faith, he can echo the words of the Introit: "*Judge me, O God!*"

On the other hand the psalmist goes on to pray, "***And plead my cause against an ungodly nation.***" Here is the paradox: The same God whom we invoke to act as our Judge we also summon as the counsel for the defence. This

would hardly be an acceptable courtroom procedure; but here we are dealing with a higher and holier relationship. In the court of divine justice we have in our Lord and Saviour both our righteous Judge and our persuasive Advocate.

“Plead my cause against an ungodly nation!” the psalmist cries. Israel was beset by hostile forces, and King David, who wrote these words, felt the pressure of the enmity, and the slander of his foes.

As we apply to our own case the petition of our text, however, we think not of any earthly nation that we might classify as “ungodly,” nor are we concerned about any political or military foe.

Our plea is rather that God would defend us against the array of hostile spiritual forces that beset us; that He would plead in our behalf against the slanders of the old evil Foe; and that He would take up our cause in the grim and continuing encounter with the triad of spiritual enemies who want to undermine our faith and subvert our soul — the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh.

And our divine Defender has an iron-clad, unshakeable defence that He can offer in our behalf. We read in 1 John 2:1-2, ***if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*** ² ***And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.***

The reason that He can ***“plead our cause against an ungodly nation”*** and effectively refute the claims of those who want to bring about our spiritual downfall is the sacrifice that He Himself has offered in our behalf, and the victory that He Himself has won for us. For He is the ***“Propitiation”*** — i.e., the atonement — for our sins. With such a defence we can face the powers of evil unshaken and unafraid.

2. From God We Can Expect Deliverance

The psalmist now goes on to indicate a further expectation of the Christian in his relationship with God, namely, deliverance. ***Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!*** he cries, ***“² For You are the God of my strength”***

The deceit and the injustice which the psalmist fears and from which he seeks deliverance are still with us today. On the scene of world affairs, recent history has written a new and depressing chapter in the record of man’s inhumanity to

man. Deception is practised as a national policy, and moral values are sacrificed upon the altar of an atheistic and materialistic philosophy of life.

Even our own enlightened and nominally Christian country is not free of the influences of deceit and injustice which blight men's relationships with each other in their economic practices, in their social attitudes, and in their political dealings.

We are exposed to these forces in the business world, as men, for the sake of advantage and profit, resort to unscrupulous methods and dishonest claims. We experience this injustice in the prejudice that has created such serious problems between the races, and that produces discrimination against people because of the colour of their skin, their ethnic origin, or their social status.

We witness the practice of deception in political circles and in the affairs of government; we confront numerous examples of injustice in the area of management-labour relations; and we see on every hand the crumbling of the foundations of honesty and integrity in our national character.

Even at its best, this world of ours is but a sorry caricature of the good earth that emerged from the creative hand of God. The forces of evil have done a thorough job of despoiling the divine handiwork. And so, as we view the corrosive effects of sin in the world around us, and as we feel the impact of the forces of deceit and injustice as they press in upon our own lives, we must repeat the plea of our text, "*Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!*"

The plea is addressed to the right source — indeed, to the only possible source of help. "***For You are the God of my strength***" cries the psalmist. The strong and saving hand of God can deliver us from the forces of deceit and injustice that would injure our body. In His limitless strength He can rescue us from the spiritual dangers that imperil our soul. Trusting in the God of our strength, we can pray with complete assurance the final petition of the Lord's own prayer, "***Deliver us from evil!***"

3. From God We Can Expect Direction

The God who delivers us from these threatening dangers, however, is also able and eager to direct us to all manner of spiritual good. Such wise and unfailing direction we may also expect of God; and for this direction we, together

with the psalmist, pray in the final words of our text: ³ ***Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill.***

The path that we must travel through life is dark and winding and steep. Left to ourselves, “*we walk in danger all the way,*” groping through the gloom, fearful of the shadows, enveloped by the night. And so, because our eyes cannot pierce the darkness, we cry to God, “***Oh, send out Your light!***”

And the radiance from above will indeed prove to be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. With that divine illumination we can clearly see the path that we are travelling and the goal that lies ahead.

But we also pray, “***Send out ... your truth!***” It is not enough for us to see the road. We must also be sure that it is the right road. And so we sing,⁷

Order my footsteps by Thy Word,
And make my heart sincere;
Make me to walk in Thy commands—
‘Tis a delightful road—

Only when we follow the direction of God’s Word — as embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed to us in the inspired words of Scripture, and as confirmed by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit — can we be sure that we are travelling “the right and good way.” This is the pathway that our Lord has charted for us; this is the pathway that all God’s saints have travelled; this is the pathway that leads to the heavenly goal.

And this pathway brings us to the goal that the psalmist has in view when, pleading for God’s light and truth, He prays, “***Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill.***” The holy hill — this is the object of our quest, this is the goal of our journey.

What is this holy hill? It is the presence of God; it is life eternal; it is the Church Triumphant; it is the celestial peace and joy that awaits the Christian pilgrim at the end of life’s way. It is Mount Zion, the place of “***the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation.***”⁸ It is the dwelling place of God.

But to reach the holy hill of Zion, we must first come to the holy hill of Calvary —

There is a green hill far away,⁹
Without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all.

The holy hill of Calvary is the goal of our Lenten quest. The holy hill of Zion is the goal of the Christian life. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Heb. 9:11-15

² John 8:46-59

³ John 5:29

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁶ Hymn 485

⁷ Hymn 345

⁸ Hebrews 9:11

⁹ Hymn 84