

**“Words at Odds”****Psalm 143**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as you worship this last Wednesday in Lent and approach Holy Week I remind you of what you heard five weeks ago: “on this [Ash Wednes]day the Church begins a holy season of prayerful and penitential reflection. Our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope. Let us pray that our dear Father in heaven, for the sake of His beloved Son and in the power of His Holy Spirit, might richly bless this Lententide for us so that we may come to Easter with glad hearts and keep the feast in sincerity and truth.” And how did God “bless this Lententide for us so that we may come to Easter with glad hearts and keep the feast in sincerity and truth”? If we’re to learn anything from the penitential psalms it’s that God blesses us by reducing us to nothing so that He might create us *anew* in His gospel.

Which makes me turn to the second verse of Psalm 143: “Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.” These words seem to be at odds, because those who aren’t righteous before God *will* enter into judgment, which is eternal separation from God (cf. 2 Thes 1:9). As David writes in Psalm 5, “you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.” And because of this David now writes, “My spirit fails! Hide not your face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit.” David knows what the sinner deserves... as do you: judgment and eternal separation from God. This is why the church has always recognized Lent as a time *not* of celebration, but of “penitential reflection... self-denial, and humble repentance.” It’s a time set aside to acknowledge the depth of your sin and need for a savior. And yes, you confess your sin each Sunday in worship... but your sinful nature tends to become jaded over these words, especially if you don’t feel the immediate consequence of your sin. So before we recognize Good Friday—when all sin was borne for all time—it’s best we give strict focus during Lent on the complete truth about us that sent Jesus to the cross to die, “so that we may come to Easter with glad hearts and keep the feast in sincerity and truth.” We hear the penitential psalms and relate to them because they’re words of men longing for relief, poems of sinners in desperate need, songs of souls tormented by their own sin and seeking the gracious God—as David writes, “I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.”

“Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.” These words seem to be at odds. But the words aren’t at odds when you realize it’s a plea made to the *gracious* God *because* none are righteous. David’s absolutely right: no one who is living, or has lived, or ever will live is righteous before God... yet he relies on the promise of God to send a savior (2 Sa 7:12-16) who will remove judgment. No one who is living, or has lived, or ever will live is righteous before God *in himself*... but because of Christ you are now righteous! “For [your] sake [God] made [Christ Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21)! This is the way of God that so many great thinkers, learned scholars, and enlightened men reject because their superior reason tells them it doesn’t make sense—it doesn’t make sense that God would die while humanity does *nothing* to atone for its sin and while humanity does *nothing* for its own salvation. When David prays to God, “Make me know the way I should go... Teach me to do your

will... Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground,” he’s asking God to instill and preserve within him this divine way that befuddles human reason, the divine way that sinful reason rejects. And this way, will, and leading of God is none other than the admission of sin and the reception of grace. But David’s enemies are trying to mislead him and make him follow their own ways: ways that minimize God’s grace, ways that deny your sin, ways that make you your own savior... ways that ultimately lead to judgment and eternal separation from God. This is why David writes, “the enemy has pursued my *soul*; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead.” His enemies want him to think he can atone for his own sins and earn his own salvation... which is *exactly* what your greatest enemy wants you to think.

All a sinner can do is receive what God has to give. All a sinner can do is receive in faith while “stretch[ing] out [his] hands to [God].” All a sinner can do is admit sin and receive grace. This is God’s way, will, and leading. In this life you struggle because you live as both saint and sinner, as one who feels the depth of sin yet knows that the death of Jesus Christ removes sin into eternity! After the admission of sin the gospel sweeps down and answers David’s prayer (which is also *your* prayer) to “Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love.” The penitent sinner, blessed in being brought to nothing, is blessed again with the forgiveness that makes a sinner a saint. You, like David, have been delivered from your enemies; you have had your life preserved; you have had the adversaries of your soul destroyed! And you continue praying as a penitent sinner, “Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.” These words aren’t at odds—they’re the words of you and me and David who know the truth about sin yet know the gracious God in Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Pastor Greg Bauch