

“Sour Wine, Sweet Victory”

John 19:28

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We come now to the fifth word of Christ in our series on the seven words of Jesus from the cross. As recorded by the apostle John in chapter 19:28, “After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” Our Lord and Savior was thirsty. Having been hung upon the cross nearly 6 hours earlier, having endured the scourging of the Romans and the bearing of His cross to Calvary, Jesus needs a drink. No doubt, His mouth had to be beyond parched, His tongue “stuck to His jaws,” as the Psalmist records in Psalm 22:15. And in this agony, knowing that He has accomplished all that He was incarnated to do, He fulfills this last bit of Scripture by saying, “I thirst.” David says in Psalm 69:21, “...and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.”

Much time has been spent by scholars trying to unravel the significance of these two simple words of Jesus. Most try to make it allegorical, or symbolic, and turn these words into a farcical play on Jesus thirsting for death, or thirsting for the souls of mankind. The reality is that, in His request for a drink, He is simply fulfilling the words He already spoke through the mouth of King David. This is how we are bid to read the Psalms, as if Jesus was speaking them, because He is as the second person of the Trinity. He has accomplished the salvation of mankind, and with parched lips, He is preparing to proclaim victory. So, the Son of God begs for a drink, that He might have the strength necessary to proclaim His victory in His 2 final words from the cross that are still to come. And though He is given and drinks of sour wine, He now is able to proclaim sweet victory.

But this victory wasn't easy. Our Lord and Savior suffered mightily on His way to win this battle on our behalf. He was beaten, spat upon, flogged, demeaned, and ridiculed for hours upon hours before He finally asks for even the slightest relief. And when He does ask for it, it is not for His own benefit, or to slake His own desire for drink. No, He did it so that He would be able to proclaim the truth of the world's redemption, so we would know that by His suffering and imminent death, we have received our salvation.

In the darkness of Calvary, just as we have discussed in the previous words of Christ, even in the most agonizing moments of His crucifixion, the Lord's thoughts are only on you, and what must be done to complete this great act of mercy. Because that is

why He is there. He is not there for His own glory, but for yours. He drinks the sour wine, so that you don't have to drink it. The last drink of Jesus before His death was one of bitterness, the bitterness of being abandoned by His Father and being left alone to die for a people that doesn't deserve His mercy. That is the burden we carry with us in this Christian life, and it is one of the hardest ones for us to understand.

Christians want so desperately to be worthy of Christ's sacrifice, but no matter how hard they try, they will never get there. This trap is one that the devil sets for all of us, trying so hard to make us believe that we have the innate ability to be righteous enough to be worthy of God's favor. But God tells us through the words of the Apostle John in his first Epistle, from 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." When we connect this with what John records in his Gospel account in 14:6, where Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me," we can clearly see that self-righteousness leads only to a declaration that Jesus is not in them. For those who rely on their own works and not the vicarious work of Christ, they are doomed to be in bondage for eternity.

There is no salvation outside of the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So many in the heretical sects try so hard to insert themselves into the equation that they lose the truth that they are poor, miserable sinners in need of a Savior. They think that by praying harder and more frequently, babbling in some secret "prayer language," helping their neighbor do some chores, or giving out Bibles at the homeless shelter that they are meriting some special grace from God and earning their necessary tick marks of salvation, if you will. Much of what they do, if done from faith in Christ Jesus and what He has done for them already, are actually good works that the Lord bids us to do. But when they are done from a heart of self-serving false righteousness, they are not good works at all. They are simply actions done by one who has lost the truth of the Messiah.

And so, they think that they have the ability to drink the sour wine just as Jesus does, to go to battle with Him at the cross and fight against sin and death by this righteous power that they have built for themselves. What hubris and willingness to neglect the words of the same Godman who hangs there for the benefit of their everlasting souls! Jesus teaches in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in Luke 18, that the one who exalts himself claiming to be righteous will not be justified, but the one who humbles himself, willing to call himself the sinner that he is will be justified. In repentance, this sinful tax collector proclaims, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He is declared justified for the sake of Christ, who has given all that his sin might be washed away by His blood.

So, it is for those who get lost in their own self-righteousness, that they will be like that Pharisee. This temptation exists for all of us, to believe that we can drink the cup of sour wine because our faith is strong enough to do it right alongside Jesus. Repent when those evil thoughts arise. Acknowledge your sinfulness and be forgiven on account of Christ, for that is what we are called to do. We are called to submit to the Lord's declaration that the victory has been won. There is no need for our righteousness, because His righteousness has covered our sinful flesh before the righteous judge in heaven. We bear the seal of Christ Jesus who has died the death that we deserve, taken the pain and suffering that should be ours, and borne the shame of our sin to the cross. There, as He drinks the necessary liquid to wet His lips, and fulfill the Words spoken by the prophet-king David, He declares that we no longer need to worry about doing enough to be worthy of His gifts.

Having won the victory over sin and the power of the devil, our Lord and Savior drinks of the sour wine of sweet victory. He has completed that which He came down from heaven to do, and what He has come to do is nothing less than win salvation for the entire world. As those who have been granted the gift of faith, we too have tasted the sweet victory, but the Lord has drunk the sour wine on our behalf. He has suffered the pangs of thirst so that we might be redeemed and declared righteous in the eyes of God. He wets His parched lips, mouth, and throat that He may declare the devil defeated, destroying all conniving plans of the evil one to usurp Jesus' power. As we continue to fight our battles against sin and the devil's wily snares, we fight knowing that Jesus has already won the battle for us. He has given Himself as a substitute for us, and as such, by faith, He has kept us in God's grace for eternity. The pain of thirst was upon Christ, our Lord, but even in that pain and suffering, our salvation was His goal. And because of His submission to God's will, that goal is accomplished, and we have been given the reward of eternal life with Him. Amen.