

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT  
Hebrews 5:7-9  
Obedience Learned the Hard Way

God hands over His innocent Lamb to the vicious and ravenous rage of the Devil, that Satan might gorge himself on the weakness of Christ, who now experiences all the frailty of human flesh. The battle, begun at Christ's birth, now continues, more ferocious than ever. The nails, the crown of thorns, the mockery, all that will sting, but not as much as this agony the all-too-human Jesus now encounters as He learns what He could never have known in heaven: obedience.

"Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered..." In heaven, the Father's will was always effortlessly the Son's will, and vice versa, but now, but now in the agony of Gethsemane, Christ must confess, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death;" must pray, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will;" must settle for His tired and tepid disciples, so easily lured into sleep and so quick to flee from danger, as His companions to comfort Him. According to His divinity, the Son and the Father are equal in power and majesty, but now, here in Gethsemane, according to His human nature and in His role as our substitute, the Son must pray in His desperation like any of us, setting aside the use of His divine powers and abandoning Himself to our helplessness. Any of us would be overcome. Any of us would despair. Any of us would be swallowed whole by the wicked foe, poisoned by his accusing, murderous, and lying fangs. But Christ prays. The more He is assailed, the more He prays. He commends Himself to His Heavenly Father; He knows there is nothing more He can do as a poor, sinful being, sinful not with His own sin, but with ours. "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31,34b)

All of us fear death. It is natural for us to do so, because death is so unnatural. We weren't created to die. Adam and Eve were created eternal beings. Sin changed that. Now the immortal has become mortal, and it doesn't sit right with our every inclination and ounce of reason. We all fear death, or at least we fear how we will die. How much more should Christ have been terrified, knowing the death that awaited Him, having existed from all eternity as the Eternal God, only now, according to the Father's will and His own great love for us, having to face the incomprehensible prospect of death, and not just any death, but death in the most spiritually and physically agonizing way, with Satan's teeth sunk into His heel, with our crown, bought with the wages of our sin, upon His head? We are all born dying. Christ, begotten of the Father from all eternity, was immune to death. Yet now, in deference to the will of His Father, in perfect obedience, He allows Himself to be infected with our sickness, with our mortality, with our suffering. And so we read, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death..." And even the angels, more than twelve legions of them, which as God He told St. Peter He could have called to His aid, but which as true Man in all our weakness He could not call, must have wept a thousand rainstorms as they watched their Master beg and plead and sob in such overwhelming distress. How many legions must have held these legions back?

Do you see how Jesus has offered Himself in every way for you? Do you see how Jesus has taken on your human feebleness and frailty, your vulnerability? Do you see how He willingly took upon Himself all that we often only begrudgingly endure? Jesus did not desire or seek out pain and suffering any more than the rest of us. The difference is that He did not run

from pain and suffering when faced with it, but rather obediently submitted to the Father for those born unwilling and unable to obey.

As the temple priest would diligently scour a lamb offered for sacrifice in search of any blemish or defect, so also the Evil One diligently hunted for some fault to find with Christ, our innocent Lamb, handed over into the jaws of this roaring lion who frantically roams the earth searching for someone to devour, whose stomach growls with hunger no matter how many souls he consumes. Satan shot His every fiery arrow of temptation into our precious, innocent Lamb and, bearing such grief in patient obedience, Christ received each, blunting their sharp heads and robbing them of their poison, so that, bearing their full brunt with no sanctuary or refuge from their terror, those fiery arrows of the wicked foe cannot now overcome us who find our sanctuary and refuge in Christ (Luther). Though it may have appeared to the casual observer of Gethsemane that the Devil would devour this Lamb, wool and all, the Lamb instead, in our place, drowns the Devil in tears and confounds Him with loud cries and petitions.

Jesus, "reaching his goal became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him," that is, for all who believe. Christ suffered for a reason. This was not some pointless exercise. Jesus was reconciling the world to the Father. This is our comfort and encouragement in every trial, so that, as Christ prayed in His great need, we also now can confidently bring our concerns and fears before God in our time of need, knowing that He who delivered His Son from the jaws of the Devil, even through death, will do the same for us.

Some people once asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29). As Christ personally learned obedience to the Father by submitting to His will and trusting in His wisdom and mercy, so also we now personally learn obedience to Christ through faith, a faith that trusts His wisdom and mercy and prays against every self-preserving instinct of our flesh, "not my will, but your will be done;" a faith which says of God with Job, even in loneliest gardens of life, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15). Taken captive through faith, our attitudes are now, as St. Paul urges, to "be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-8).

What a miracle we have before us today! It is not like so many other miracles that impress us with the divine wonder that surrounds them. It is a unique miracle, marvelous in its painstaking humanity, in its agonizing weakness and utter helplessness. The Son of God pleads as a beggar before God. The Son of God weeps in fear and cries out in anguish. The Son of God dresses Himself in the infirmity of our flesh and thinks our thoughts and prays our prayers and cries our tears in the midst of unbearable spiritual and mental suffering. He does this to learn obedience for us. Now learn obedience from Him. He who went to such lengths to redeem you intimately understands your struggle and surely will not abandon you as you do so. Amen.