

December 14, 2014

John 3:16:

“Whoever Believes In Him Should Not Perish”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A Lutheran pastor sat at the bedside of a dying parishioner. He said to her: "You may pass away tonight. If you do, are you sure you will go to heaven?" She responded: "Oh, I feel that way." The pastor paused, and then he said: "What if in half an hour from now you do not feel that way? What if you feel that God is angry with you? And what if you die then? You must not base your hopes of heaven on your changing feelings; you must base them on Jesus' unchanging Word."

Again, on this Third Sunday in Advent, we are reminded that *It's About God's Love in Christ*. It centers on his unchanging feelings for us in the midst of our feelings that shift like dry sand in a strong wind. And this morning we focus our attention on these words of John 3:16: **"Whoever Believes In Him Will Not Perish."**

When you finally stop thinking of perishing as an abstraction, and begin to apply it to yourself, to perish is a frightening thing to ponder. Say it to yourself: "I am going to die." And even then, unless we have been told that we are terminal with the doctor's vague guestimate of days, months, or possibly years it still hardly sinks in with all of its enormity because most of us aren't there yet.

And what did you think of the pastor's words to his dying parishioner? Did you understand what he was trying to prepare her for? He was trying to prepare her for the moment or moments when the devil will find a way to whisper a little reminder into the conscience of all the horrendous things that we have thought and said and done through the course of our lives against God, against the ones we love, and against our neighbors. The devil will whisper: "Look at how you are dying. God really is angry. How can he possibly forgive you for all your secret thoughts, the things you've said and done - and left undone? All is lost!"

How will you deal with that whisper of the devil to your conscience in that moment when you don't feel like things are going very well? How will you push him back and quiet the conscience when the sins of your life morph into a monstrous black hole that is about to swallow you up? When good feelings have given way to feelings of guilt and fright will it be enough to be distracted by let's say memories of good days gone by, or to hear someone say "just think positive thoughts and you'll feel better?" Of course not, the pastor wanted to make sure that his parishioner was resting solely on the booming voice of God's gracious promise and his feelings for her.

In our text for this morning we have this promise: **"Will Not Perish!"** And that promise is guaranteed because "God gave his one and only Son." The Christian, by faith, pushes back - knowing and believing that the sins of life have been put to rest, and the accusations of the devil have been overturned! **"Will Not Perish!"**

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him . . ." Did you know that the word "believe" is found 98 times in the Gospel of John? That's really incredible in comparison to other books of the Bible. In Chapter 20:30-31, the apostle John states the purpose of his

Gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." So, do you? Do you believe in him who lived a perfect life and died for all of our sins that you might receive forgiveness, life, and salvation? "Whoever believes" our Gospel lesson states.

Now, there is a lot of wrangling among Christians today when it comes to this notion of believing or having faith in Jesus Christ. I would imagine that most, if not all of you, have never heard of a man by the name of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). Briefly, he taught that sinners believe or come to faith in Jesus Christ by their own power. This view has been carried on by the Methodists, the Holiness Movement, and we find it among Baptists, Pentecostals, fundamentalists, and evangelicals everywhere in the United States. It is often called "decision-for-Christ theology" because it advocates that an individual must make a decision to believe in Christ. How does this thinking square with what the Bible says?

In John 6:28-29, after Jesus fed the 5000, "then they said to him, 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" Again, Jesus says in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Also, we read from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God." And Paul again says in Ephesians 2:4-10: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

The Bible makes it clear that God alone is responsible for a sinner's faith. When we say "I believe in Jesus Christ," we are to understand that these words are the echo of the heart to the command of God: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31)." Now, why do I make a point of this? I set this in front of you that you may understand that the words - **"Will Not Perish!"** - rests solely with God's power, God's feelings, and God's work in our lives. Let's face it, our sin and perishing is much too large for any of us to handle in any way, shape, or form. We can't handle sin and perishing at all. We can't stop it by our own power and strength. If our reaching heaven is based upon us, we are completely doomed. Our hope of heaven must rest in the God who said, "let light shine out of darkness." The God who says this has "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6)."

Our salvation is by God's undeserved love. "For God so loved . . . not that we loved God . . . but that he loved us and gave his only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Either it is grace or we diminish God and the gift of his Son. If we say that it is in our power, then we should thank ourselves. And that is absolutely ridiculous. Luther writes:

The words "not perish" are inexpressibly glorious. They mean: to be rid of sin, to have a good conscience, and not to be under the Law. Otherwise the Law punishes sin; but now, even if someone feels sin and the wrath of God, sin will not give him a bad conscience,

because his sin is forgiven. The Law will not accuse him, sin will not bite or plague him, death will not devour him; for if he believes these words, he is safe and secure. This is what we preach and believe. And let anyone who does not share this faith pray God that it may be imparted also to him.

Faith rests in the promise of God. And as it rests in the promise of God it hopes when there appears to be no hope at all. The only thing that will help us in our final hour is the conviction that comes from what God has said to us, and God does not lie. The only thing that will give us strength when our strength is dried up is the conviction that the Son of God was given into death for us, that sin is forgiven, that death is destroyed, and that all these evils have been done away with. And in this conviction we well up with great expectation - hope - of eternal life, salvation, and glory - God himself has been restored to us. This is what comforts us when we are frightened and troubled: **"Will Not Perish!"**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott