

Clothed in His Righteousness Alone

Galatians 1:6-9

A sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

The hymn, "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less," is based on the parable in Matthew 7:24-27 about the wise man who built his house on the rock; "and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall because it had been built on the rock." In contrast, the foolish man "built his house on the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it."

The first line of the hymn, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness," means that my hope is built on nothing less than or other than Jesus' blood and righteousness. As you know, the words righteousness, holiness, and peace (shalom) all flow together in Hebrew. Therefore we could also say: My hope is built on Jesus' blood and holiness.

The hymn goes on: "No merit of my own I claim, but wholly lean on Jesus' name." The word "wholly" implies the word "holy." The play on "wholly" and "holy" works the way overtones in music do.

Verse 2: "When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace; in every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil." Note that the word "veil" is used twice in this verse. Remember, too, that the word "veil," as a face covering, is pronounced like "vale," as in valley.

This hymn was written two hundred years ago. In the original the author used the word "vale" probably because he was remembering the Twenty-Third Psalm, verse 4: "Yea though I walk through the valley of deep darkness." The valley is the vale. The RSV translates this, "the valley of the shadow of death," but the original is "deep darkness," which includes death and all deep troubles.

Verse 3: "His oath, his covenant, his blood," What is this oath? It says the Lord swears by himself (Hebrews 6:13-18). There is nothing higher. He can only take an oath on the basis of his own name. That covenant is his promise and the promise is that through what he has done on the cross, "his blood" has taken and will take care of our problems.

"His oath, his covenant, his blood, Sustain me in the raging flood; When all supports are washed away, He then is all my hope and stay." That "all" means "Christ alone."

And finally verse 4: "When he shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in him be found, Clothed in his righteousness alone, Redeemed to stand before the throne!" In the original the author wrote "faultless I stand before the throne."

Then the refrain: "On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand." That says something about "Christ alone," the holiness, the righteousness, what it's all about.

This hymn reflects what Paul writes in Galatians 1:6-9. He talks about those who are changing the gospel, who are perverting the gospel by adding to it. He speaks against them in the strongest terms: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be" – and here the translators choke – they write: "let him be accused." It really should be translated: "Let him be damned." The Greek is "anathema." In Hebrew the word is "herem," which means "separated from God forever." The most terrible kind of curse there could be.

This is an amazing statement. Paul writes this in Galatians 1:8 and then repeats it again in verse 9: "I say again: If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be cut off from God forever."

What is going on in the churches of Galatia? There are those who have added to the gospel and thus changed the gospel. Paul gives a couple of examples in chapter 2. He talks about people who have come from the Judaizers. They have sneaked in to spy on the people. They have sneaked in to see if people are still following the law. Instead of saying we are now free in Christ, they have told the people: You still have to keep the law.

Paul talks about a dinner. Peter, the head of the apostles, was there. Peter had given in to the Judaizers and his weakness was contagious. Paul says: "I opposed him to his face" (Gal 2:11) because he "was not straightforward about the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14).

In Gal 3:1 Paul writes: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" "Bewitched you" meaning the evil one comes in and tricks you. Paul continues: You started with the gospel, but you have gone back to adding other requirements. You started with the Spirit and now you're going back to good works. How could you be so foolish!

We, like them, get caught up in this kind of thinking. Paul comes back in Gal 2:5 and 14 to "the truth of the gospel." This is also what we have in the hymn, "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less." This is the bedrock on which everything stands.

Recall what Paul writes in Romans 1:16: "The gospel is the power of God for salvation." It's **the** power. It's not part of the power, or one of the powers. It's **the** power of God for salvation.

We ask: "How can we be so absolute?" We live in a world of relativism, of no absolutes, or at least that is what is claimed. But, if everything is relative, then everything is meaningless. If everything is true, then nothing is true. As Luther points out: By ourselves we end up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. That's why it's striking to come back to Paul where he is dealing with this kind of appeal to relativism.

What is our hope? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about the truth of the gospel, the cross alone. He writes in 1 Cor 1:21-22: "In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom . . . Jews demand signs/miracles and Greeks seek wisdom . . ." The Greeks seek wisdom. He's talking about us, the non-Jews.

He creates three contrasts. First, he writes in 1 Cor 1:27: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." We think of miracles and wisdom as power. The opposite of miracle and wisdom is the cross. The cross is an anti-miracle.

Second, he writes: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27). What is weak in the world to shame the strong is the cross.

And third, he writes: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:27-28).

Over against "Everybody has their own opinion," there is one answer: The cross alone. Christ alone. By grace alone. By faith alone. This is what it's all about. That's why we memorize 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the holiness of God." It says "righteousness" but that includes holiness. He takes our sin and death and gives us his life and holiness forever. The best deal there ever was.

In the hymn, "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," in the fourth verse it says: "When he shall come with trumpet sound, oh, may I then in him be found." It's not: "I find him," but "I am found." He has done it; he is doing it; and he will be doing it as the rock which stands forever. It is all summed up in the fourth verse:

"When he shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh, may I then in him be found,
Clothed in his righteousness alone,
Redeemed to stand before the throne.
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand." Amen