

Jesus forgave the sins of the paralyzed man. And then he proved that his word of forgiveness was true by causing him to walk. This is how God operates. He declares us poor, unworthy sinners to be righteous. On the last day, he will prove that his declaration was true by raising us from the dead.

Only God can see faith. Only God can see that you and I are truly righteous. Only God can see that our sins are forgiven. The eyes of mortal men cannot see this. As St. James says, “You see that a man is justified by works and not only by faith. (Jam 2:24)” James is describing what you see. You can’t see that I am righteous by looking at my faith. You can’t see my faith. You can only see the evidence of my faith by looking at my works. You hear me confess Christ, and you observe that I strive to act like a Christian. But even then, you see that I also fall short. So as St. Paul says, we see only in part, like a blurred image in a mirror (1 Cor 13). By faith we possess what our eyes cannot see. We have what only God can see. We have the righteousness of our Savior and the full and free forgiveness of our sins accomplished by his perfect obedience in our place. We have this righteousness and forgiveness by faith. But we can’t see it fully. We see traces of it. Yet, God promises that we will one day see it face to face.

The devil knows that we can’t see what God promises us. He tempts us to doubt that our sins are forgiven and that we stand righteous before God. He gets folks to think that they are already good enough. Or he convinces them that they can’t have any certainty at all. So people are always trying to prove to themselves that they are good. They go on trips to this or that special place, march in this or that parade, support this or that cause, avoid eating this or that food – whatever it takes to convince themselves that they are good. They will even go so far as denying God’s existence altogether if only that will give them some kind of peace of mind. After all, if God doesn’t exist, or if God is so far away that he might as well not exist, then why worry about your sins anyway? Why worry about what is true or false, good or evil? Just try to survive. Make the best out of what you can see for now. That’s the best you can do. So the devil would have us think.

But when the devil attacks the certainty in your salvation, when he gets people to deny that their sins are forgiven or that they need any forgiveness in the first place, he isn’t just attacking our faith. He is attacking God himself. He is attacking what God himself says. God says that you are righteous for Christ’s sake. God says that your sins are forgiven. God called you his child when he baptized you into Christ’s death and resurrection. So even though you find that your body is dying

because of sin, God declares you to be alive because of the righteousness of his Son. God declares you to be dead to sin and alive to him through Jesus Christ your Lord. And no matter how much the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh point to the evidence that your sins are not forgiven, God's Word stands firm. Your Lord is determined to prove that what he says about you is true. He will prove this not only to you, but finally to all the world.

Of course, God doesn't prove it to us all at once. He makes us pass through various trials in this life, proving our faith and the faithfulness of his promise. In other words, he proves that the faith he gives us is true. And he proves that his Word is true. He strengthens your faith when you have to pass through temptations by driving you to cling more firmly to his promise of grace. He also gives you relief from your times of grief and hardship. As the hymn goes,

God knows full well when times of gladness
Should be the needful thing for thee.
When He has tried thy soul with sadness
And from all guile has found thee free,
He comes to thee all unaware
And makes thee own His loving care.

God knows when you need to be tested. And he knows when you need a break. At times he makes it difficult for you to see his goodness so that you would learn to trust only in his word of promise. And at other times he shows you glimpses of his goodness toward you. He makes the sun come up. He feeds you in both your body and in your soul. He keeps his congregation singing his praises. He provides faithful friends who care for you and comfort you. So you can sing in the hymn, "In all things I see traces of His tender love for me." And yet even while God proves his goodness to you, even while he proves your faith and his sure promise, he saves the best proof for the end. He is preparing you for this final proof that his Word is true and your faith is not in vain. On the last day, he will raise your body from the dead, and you will see with your own eyes your living Redeemer.

Consider the example of Job. Satan accused Job of only serving God because he had a lot of earthly wealth. God let Satan take all these things away from Job. Then Satan continued to accuse. When Job's friends tried to comfort him, the devil got into the details, causing them to assume that Job was being punished for something he had done. By the end of the book, God proved his faithfulness. Even though Job's three friends were unable to give him comfort, God provided a

younger and less influential friend to point him to the truth. He then restored everything to Job. He set the record straight that Job's faith was true and that he was righteous according to his Word. But the most important proof came in the middle of the book of Job. While he was going through all this pain, in the midst of all the anguish and misery, Job pointed to the greatest proof of all. He said,

I know that my Redeemer lives and He, the Last, will stand on the dust.
After this, my skin will surround this body, and from within my flesh I will see God. (Job 19:25-26)

When the devil and the world mock your faith and cause you to doubt whether you stand righteous before God, your Lord takes it personally. Because it is his Word that declares you righteous. And his Word is no easy word. Yes, God is all powerful. Nothing is too difficult for him. But that doesn't mean it's all a walk in the park for him. Those words of forgiveness are stained with his own blood, sweat, and tears. Which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or "Get up and walk?" Or to put it another way, which is easier to say, "You are righteous before God," or "Come out of the grave and see God with your own eyes?" Jesus is not pitting one against the other. Instead, he is proving that his Word of forgiveness is true. He is proving that he has the authority on earth to take away the sin of the world. And he is proving how difficult this forgiveness truly is.

God had provided for this paralyzed man. Even though he couldn't walk, God provided him with faithful friends who loved him and carried him to Jesus. This was a glimpse of God's goodness toward him, but it was proof nonetheless. The problem isn't that God doesn't give enough evidence of his goodness. It's that our eyes and this world are too blind to see it. God sees what we can only begin to see when we hold onto his promise.

When these people brought their paralyzed friend to see Jesus, anyone with eyes could see that they loved and cared for him. But Jesus saw their faith. Anyone with eyes could see that this poor man couldn't walk. But Jesus saw the deeper problem of sin, which infects us all just as much. Anyone with eyes could see that the paralyzed man had a tough life, but Jesus saw that the man was afraid of death. And perhaps those with eyes might assume that this paralyzed man looks like he is cursed by God. But Jesus saw him as a child of God. So Jesus declared, "Take courage, child! Your sins are forgiven." Here is the substance of what is hoped for, the evidence of what our eyes can't see. Here is the object of our faith. It is

the words of God, the promise of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that our sins are forgiven.

These words were not easy words to speak. When Jesus saw the true need of this man he saw the entire reason he came to earth. He saw the sin of the whole world he would bear on himself. He saw the terror of death he would feel in his own soul. He saw the bitter cup his Father prepared for him to drink. He did not choose the easy part. He won forgiveness and righteousness for all sinners by his perfect obedience unto death, even the death of a cross.

When the Bible scholars grumbled against Jesus for saying these words, Jesus knew what they were thinking. He could read their minds and their hearts. He knows his enemies even better than they know themselves. He knows the devil better than the devil knows himself. He sees and understands what surpasses the understanding even of the angels. He proved it by healing this poor paralyzed man and causing him to walk. But this was only a glimpse of the proof he would show after being laid in the tomb. By rising from the dead, Jesus has proven that he is the Son of God. He has proven that his Word is true. He has proven that our sins are forgiven. And he has proven that we who believe in him will not be put to shame, but he will raise us up on the last day.

So even while we wait to see this final proof with our own eyes, it has already been proven in Jesus. Even while we must bear the difficulties and temptations of this sin-stained life, Jesus has already borne it all in his own body. So don't be afraid. As Jesus says, cheer up! Take courage! Don't let your heart be troubled. Believe his Word. Believe that your pastor is called to proclaim this Word to you. Rely on your Lord's promise in baptism, in his body and blood, in his precious gospel. Open your eyes and pay attention to how often God proves his goodness and faithfulness to you. And lift up your heads to look for the final proof, the blessed day when you will see your Redeemer face to face. Amen.