

God gave St. John a vision of the saints in heaven. They worship God and his Christ around his throne day and night. There is no sin, no death, no poverty, no weeping, no weakness, hunger, thirst, or persecution. Every tear is wiped away from their eyes. But notice it doesn't just say that they are in heaven. They came from somewhere. They came from strife and affliction. They weren't living their best life until they entered an eternal retirement. No, they are those who needed saving. They needed comforting. They needed feeding. They needed rest. They came out of the great tribulation, the great suffering, the great battle against the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh. They bore the cross. So as we hear of this vision of the saints in heaven, we also get a picture of the saints on earth.

Jesus says that if you want to be his disciple, then you must deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow him. This cross is not one that redeems you. Only the cross of Jesus takes away your sin and saves you. Your cross does not save you. Your cross does not make up for any of your sins. Your cross does not set you free. When I was in High School we had to sing this so called Gospel Song in choir. There was a line, which went like this: "Should Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me." Two of my brothers and I were in the choir, and we refused to sing this part of the song. Should Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? When we got to this part of the song in the concert, my brother Christian yelled out, "Yes!" Yes, this was God's will. The obedience, suffering, and death of our Lord Jesus Christ is all sufficient. It has taken away the sin of the world. By this death you are fully reconciled to God. In your baptism God joins you to the very death of his Son. You are clothed with him, sharing in everything he has won for you, including his resurrection.

But the song is right about one thing. There is a cross for you. This is not the cross that sets you free. Instead, God lays a cross upon you in order to test and prove your faith. The sufferings of this life, the persecutions, the temptations, the sinful thoughts you must fight against – God uses all of these things to train you, to teach you repentance, and to direct you to the living voice of Jesus who says, "Come to me, you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." This is your life as a saint here on earth. You are baptized into the very death of Christ, washed by the blood of the Lamb. And as evidence that this saving suffering and death of Jesus does indeed cover you, God gives you afflictions in this life. He makes you pass through the tribulation, to face a hostile world, to fight against your wicked desires, and to stand against false teachings. They are not pleasant experiences. And yet, they are signs and tokens of God's favor. They remind you of what you are wearing in your baptism. You are wearing the very garment of Christ, his righteousness, his scars that heal you. So in this way your sufferings are a comfort. Your cross strengthens your faith, not because of how well you are carrying it, but because it directs you back always to the mercy and blessing of your Savior.

When Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount, he is speaking to saints. He is speaking to his disciples. He is addressing those whom God has called to bear the cross, to suffer in this life. But he teaches them that such suffering is a blessing. The cross teaches you how poor your own spirit is. St. Paul refers to the Christian's cross as afflictions that are light and only for a

moment, and he says that they are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4:16 ff.). We look for what our eyes cannot yet see. We look to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. The cross teaches us to look forward to this. And the more we look forward to our eternal inheritance in heaven, the more it puts things into perspective. No matter how much or how little we have on earth, we learn from God's heavy hand that there awaits for us something truly rich and imperishable. The material blessings of this life are nothing in comparison. And the saints on earth learn from their Lord that they are completely poor in ourselves. But Jesus blesses them with this assurance: To them belongs to the kingdom of heaven.

The cross teaches us to mourn like Christians. Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus. He wept at the unbelief of his countrymen. The cross teaches us to weep, but not like unbelievers who have no hope. No, we learn to weep over what made Jesus weep. False doctrine, which deceives souls and turns people away from the assurance of their salvation in Jesus, makes a saint mourn. When you are outnumbered by the crowd singing a song they think is fun, but you know that it teaches damaging lies about your Lord, this makes a saint sad. When you cry over the death of your loved one, you aren't just weeping over the end of a life. You have learned through the crosses of this life what God's law reveals: the wages of sin is death. But you mourn knowing that Christ came to make satisfaction for sins. You mourn knowing that sin and death have been defeated, that God's anger has been turned away, and that he comforts you with the pledge of his salvation in his precious gospel. So Jesus blesses those saints who mourn by promising that they will be comforted.

The cross also crushes your selfish pride. It teaches you humility, meekness, and gentleness. As St. Peter says, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that he may exalt you at the right time." This humility is not demoralizing. God doesn't afflict you with sorrows to break your spirit, emasculate you, or make you lose hope. The devil wants to do this to you. The kind of humility he pushes is not a godly kind. It is a soft, feckless, and cowardly squishiness, which gives into the pressures of the world. Folks whine and complain about getting bullied, but then they themselves become bullies the first chance they get. They act as if they are humble because they won't assert what is true, but then they become proud and self-affirming in the lies of this world. Yet, pride goes before the fall. The reason God teaches you to be gentle and meek and humble in this life is so that you would look to Christ who came in meekness to save you from sin and overcome the world. As David sings in Psalm 18, "Your gentleness, [O Lord], has made me great." The cross teaches us to rely on the gentleness of our Savior who blesses us with the assurance of our inheritance.

The cross we carry in this earthly life makes us hungry and thirsty. We don't always realize how hungry and thirsty we are. But faith is always longing for what only the gospel of Jesus can give. And the crosses of this life whet our appetite. When you consider the wars and conflicts of this world, the broken relationships, the addictions, damaged reputations, stealing, and the lack of compassion, why does all this bother you so much? You are bothered, because you see a lack of justice. You can't find any righteousness in this world. And when you look at your own sinful desires, you can't find it in yourself either. You aren't satisfied even by your best works.

The heavy hand of God teaches you this. The cross brings about that hunger and thirst for what only Christ can give. So Jesus blesses those who have this hunger and thirst. He says, “They will be satisfied.”

The cross also brings about fruit in us. By testing our faith, God fans into flames the love he has poured into our hearts. The cross you bear teaches you to show mercy on one another with the assurance of Christ that his mercies are new every morning. Your heart is cleansed by faith in the blood of Jesus, and like gold that is purified by fire, God gives you pain to burn away any certainty in the things of this world. Instead, you he proves your faith in the assurance that you will see him face to face. And just as God’s Son made peace by the blood of his cross, he trains you to seek peace and pursue reconciliation with those who have sinned against you. Showing mercy and seeking peace are often painful. It is impossible, by your own reason or strength, to keep your heart pure from anger and resentment. These fruits of faith are often hidden. But Jesus blesses his saints who are bearing their cross. They will receive mercy. They will see God. And they will be called sons of God.

Bearing the cross is not just outward attacks from the world. Most of the crosses you bear are inward afflictions. The devil doesn’t just want to take your health, wealth, reputation, and life. He wants your conscience and your heart most of all. Paul described his cross as outwardly fighting and inwardly afraid (2 Cor 7:5). Most of the crosses you carry in this life are inside of you. But Jesus does not fail to mention the outward crosses. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. This is when Jesus intensifies his preaching. He makes it personal. Before this he was saying, “Blessed are those.” Now he speaks directly to you. “Blessed are you,” he says, “when people insult you, persecute you, lie, and tell only evil about you on account of Me.” Jesus prepares us for this part of the great tribulation. Most of the suffering of this life is simply the pressures from the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh to give in and lose hope in God’s grace. But here Jesus is preparing you for the outward attacks as well.

Persecutions don’t all come in the same portion. Perhaps you aren’t thrown in jail or whipped. But these attacks come in different forms. When people call you and your church hateful because you refuse to approve of the sexual perversions of this age, then blessed are you. When people accuse you of being a cannibal for eating and drinking the body and blood of your Lord with your mouth, then blessed are you. When people accuse you of being ignorant, foolish, and out of touch, because you believe in the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the miracles of Jesus, and especially his atoning death and resurrection, then blessed are you. When people say that you are unfit to teach your own children because you are raising them to fear, love, and trust in the God revealed in the Bible, then blessed are you. You are in good company. They said the same kinds of things about the prophets, and they will say them about Christ’s sheep until he returns in glory.

Not everyone gets imprisoned or put to death. The sufferings of this Christian life are distributed by God in his good wisdom. He knows how much discipline and training each of his saints needs. But the share of God’s kingdom and righteousness is given to all of us equally (2 Pet 1:1). All who have been baptized into Christ, who trust in his name – they are all covered with

the same righteousness of Jesus, which covers all their sins. We all have the same Holy Spirit. We are all coming out of the great suffering, the great tribulation, and into the kingdom of heaven.

In fact, we already have. Consider little Rohann this morning. As surely as God's name was spoken over him, and as surely as the water was poured on him, he has washed his robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. He has been made a saint, set apart from this dying world, and the kingdom of heaven belongs to him. He has many crosses ahead of him. But God has prepared these light and momentary afflictions to strengthen and preserve all of us in his Word and faith until we die. Every tear, every trial, every inward and outward battle – God works it all out for good for his saints who love him and are called according to his purpose. Amen.