

Silent and Smitten*Psalm 38*

When a man is accused falsely, his natural response is to deny the false charges, to speak against his accusers, to attempt to prove his innocence. Silence and guilt seem to go hand in hand, for he who has no answer to an accusation must be guilty, or at least hiding something.

When Jesus stood before His accusers, before the High Priest, and the rulers of the people, many false charges were brought against Him. We heard of the false witnesses especially last week, who arose and accused Jesus of many blasphemies, things that He knew not, had nothing to do with. This evening we see the response of Jesus to his accusers. He made none at all. Isaiah 53:7 declared: "Like a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not His mouth." The priests and rulers knew that their accusations were lies, but they had laid a trap for Jesus. Whether He spake, or said nothing, they could pronounce Him guilty. If He spake, they would accuse Him of lying under oath, and add that to His charge. At His silence, they said to Him, "What is it that these people witness against you? Will you say nothing?" (Mark 14:60). If He would not speak, they would be happy to judge Him based upon His silence. Later that same evening, Jesus stood before a second court, before Pontius Pilate, the only man who could authorize the crucifixion of Jesus. When the chief priests accused Jesus of yet many more blasphemies, again Jesus remained silent. Pilate did not know Jesus. He did not know if was guilty, but the silence of Jesus seemed to Pilate to imply guilt. Therefore He also says, "Answerest thou nothing? Behold how many things they witness against thee" (Mark 15:4). Once more Jesus stood before a judge, this time Herod Agrippa. Again the priests arose and accused Him of many things. Again, Jesus answered nothing.

The silence of Jesus is remarkable. The Gospels do not tell the reason for His silence, but our Psalm does. Once more we have the privilege to look into the heart of our Lord as so many had turned against Him and lied about Him, and He in silence, bore it. Our Psalm declares, "They also that seek after my life lay snares for me: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long. But I, as a deaf man, heard not; and I was as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth. Thus I was as a man that heareth not, and in whose mouth are no reproofs."

The words of this Psalm could be applied to any Christian. They are words with which we can comfort ourselves in tribulation, or whenever we bear the chastening rod of our heavenly Father. That is true, however, not because this is a "generic" Psalm, but because it is a passion Psalm. Our burden becomes light, our yoke easy, in the shadow of the pas-

sion and the cross of our Redeemer.

That this is Christ, is plain to see, when the Psalm, as do many of them, draws a striking contrast between the intrinsic righteousness of Jesus (20: "They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries; because I pursue that which is good."), and the imputed sin which he bares on our behalf (4: "Mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me"). In one Psalm a Man who is bearing both the wrath (1: "O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath:), and the favor of God (15: "For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God"). These two things are true for Christ alone. They are true of us only because of Christ, only because, in Christ Jesus, we are made righteous, cleansed from all our iniquity. So you see, dear Christian, whenever we see the righteousness of any man declared in the Scriptures, there is Christ, the only Righteous One, in whom the whole world is redeemed.

Who is it than can stand in silence before false accusers more than any other? Is it not the Righteous man, the man whose only judge is the Father in heaven? What does it matter what false men may say? What can their accusations accomplish in the soul? Can they condemn a righteous man to eternal damnation or oblivion with their lies? By no means. Here we begin to understand the silence of our Lord. He stands before false accusers, knowing indeed that He is the Son of God, the innocent Lamb of God. What is more, He needs no other witness than the witness of the Father in heaven. He declared, John 5:30-32, "I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me. If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true. There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true." Had not the Father Himself confirmed the Word of His Son, when He declared from heaven, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"? Therefore in His silence Jesus turns to His Father, knowing that He will hear: "For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God. For I said, Hear me, lest otherwise they should rejoice over me: when my foot slippeth, they magnify themselves against me."

One more witness he had. All of the Scriptures testified of Him. Moses testified of Him. The prophets declared His innocence and righteousness. If these men, these Scribes and priests, the teachers of the people with the most intimate knowledge of the Scriptures, would not believe the very Scriptures which they taught, why would they believe the same witness in the mouth of the Son of God whom they so despised? Therefore Jesus remains silent.

But beyond every other reason for silence, there was this: The charges of His accusers may indeed be false as to His person and nature, but at that moment, Jesus was under the curse of the Law, for He bore all the guilt of all the world. He was made a curse for us, even as His enemies cursed His

name. Even the blasphemies of His accusers, their lies, their murder, even these He bears. Of what sin was Jesus not guilty, when all sins were laid upon Him, the Innocent One, by His Father in heaven? Therefore He continued in silence, lest He be guilty of turning away from the cup that His Father had given Him to drink. He declares, "For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me."

In silence He bears these accusations, and not one of His friends stands by Him to speak on His behalf. They all stand afar off, too afraid and intimidated to speak up. "My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off." Yet their grief at watching Him, could in no way equal the grief that He bore as He stood alone. In our Psalm Jesus declares His grief and dejection, as He was lowly and bowed down; mourning and heavy; greatly troubled, and feeble. Who was there to stand up for Him? Would He indeed fall as His enemies rose up against Him?

There was no justice to be found in the courts of men, yet even the courts of wicked men were under the absolute power of God. Jesus would not have himself condemned by false charges in a false court. From their own mouths, even as they prepared to take His life, our Lord would have a true confession. He would have them condemn Him, not for whom He was not, or for what He did not do, but for who He was in truth. Thus finally He spoke, not to deny false charges, but to confess His person and work. When the High Priest asked Him point blank, "We demand that you answer this court under oath (adjure), Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus answered plainly: "I am. And ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." No confession but this would they receive from Him. Upon no other confession would they condemn Him but the truth. And at this truth, the High Priest responded, "What need have we of witnesses? He has condemned Himself with His own words. What say you all?" And they answered, "He is guilty of death."

Shall we condemn these men for sentencing the Son of God for His good confession? Condemn them indeed for their hatred, for their amoral ambition, for their cruelty. But their sentence, spoken by men who sat in Moses' seat (Matt. 23:2; John 11:51), was a just sentence, a true condemnation, for if indeed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, what possible conclusion could anyone make but, "He is guilty of death." For the Scriptures plainly spake, "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Therefore He is smitten, stricken, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53). The chief priests had no regard for this Word of God. Their desire to crucify Jesus was driven by nothing but jealousy, ambition, and unbelief. Yet did God

use their wickedness to make the pronouncement of death that would fulfill the Scriptures and bring life unto all men.

Jesus would Himself confirm this when, after His resurrection, He upbraided the faith of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" Later on, when Jesus appeared to the eleven, He said, "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, and said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day"

Nor did Jesus say these things only after His death. He knew His end, and this gave Him peace. He told His disciples, "Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33).

And no matter how cast down Jesus was in His passion, this thought held Him, and kept Him on His course. The Father was with Him. The Father was pleased with Him. The Father still was His hope, His joy, His salvation, for all these things that He must suffer were for the highest good. Therefore, though He is in the pit of despair, He does not abandon hope. Instead, He cries out to the Lord "Forsake me not, O LORD: O my God, be not far from me. Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation" (21,22).

So also we cry out to our Lord! "Oh, be not far from me. make haste to help me, for Thou, Oh Lord, art our salvation." Christ Jesus, the Father's perfect Son, has born our sins, suffered rebuke and blasphemy, and in silence submitted Himself to His Father's will. His *Father's* will, *our* Father's will. And if it was our Father's will that Christ Jesus should be our Redeemer through such suffering and death, then we need not fear that He has abandoned us now. The Passion of our Lord is the proof of our Father's good will and pleasure. Therefore we too can with all confidence bear our light burdens humbly, patiently, even silently, knowing that none but God Himself is our judge. His judgment has already been pronounced: Not Guilty, by virtue of Christ Jesus. May we ever remember the willing obedience of our Lord Jesus, that whether in peace or tribulation, our hearts may be glad, our troubled conscience silenced, as we rest in the assurance of our Salvation. Amen.