

*Our Secure Comfort in the Hands of our Lord Jesus Christ*

Isaiah 4:2-6

In that day shall the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel. <sup>3</sup> And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem: <sup>4</sup> When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning. <sup>5</sup> And the LORD will create upon every dwelling place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night: for upon all the glory shall be a defence. <sup>6</sup> And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain.

It is for good reason that the Scriptures, and Jesus, in particular, uses the analogy of sheep and shepherds to describe the relationship between Christ and His people, the elect of the Lord. A shepherd is ultimate example of a benevolent ruler. He governs every aspect of the lives of the sheep. He shows them what to eat and drink, where to sleep. He guides them from place to place, deciding where they will shelter or in which fields they will pasture. He defends them from wolves and other dangerous beasts. Most of the time, he guides them merely by his voice, and they know that voice and follow it. When a sheep has other ideas and tries to wander off, he may need to be chasten the sheep, but only so much that they learn to follow him, lest they be lost to wolves and or die of starvation. The sheep are known by their shepherd, each one of them, and so long as they remain with their shepherd, they are secure, and comforted.

All men want such security, but most men would like to have it without having the shepherd who provides it. It is such security that our Lord Jesus Christ offers to His Church, when He says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). It is such security that men naturally think they do not need, nor want. But even for those sheep, those people who know they need such a Lord and Master, they would like to have the benefits of such a Shepherd, even when they can no longer hear His voice and the comfort He brings. I bring up this verse especially, because it is often used to say that those who are in Christ Jesus cannot possibly fall away, that even if a man were to wander off, he cannot be lost forever, but must always come back. If he does not, then he was never in Christ Jesus to begin with. You might think at first that this kind of security is good and desirable, but I would ask you to reconsider what it really means. If this is so, that those who fall away were never saved to begin with, then how can any man *ever* be comforted and secure in the knowledge of Jesus Christ? Men, women, children, even close family and friends, do leave the Church. Our Lord Jesus seeks out and brings many of them back, but others are persistent in their wan-

dering, will not return, and die in unbelief. We remember them when they were among us. Sunday after Sunday they faithfully heard the Word of Christ, they glorified Him, they received the forgiveness of sins, they spoke of their Lord. They were baptized in His name. They confirmed their Baptism before us all, and thereafter received the body and blood of the Lord. Was it all a lie? Did they truly not believe to begin with? Did the promise of Baptism which God has given to us and to our children fail in their case? If so, then who is to say that your faith or my faith is real? Perhaps as much as we *think* we believe in Jesus, we don't really, and we too will fall away because we were never saved to begin with.

On the old maps, before the world had been explored, at the unexplored edges, the cartographers sometimes wrote, "Here there be dragons." So we might also say regarding this wretched idea of the perseverance of the Saints, or as it is often called today, "once saved, always saved." The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not teach us to be uncertain, but secure in the knowledge of our gracious and merciful God, who dwells among us with His divine presence, protecting us like a shepherd, by day and night, assuring us always that we are His dear ones, and that no one can take us out of His hand. That is the comforting word which Isaiah has spoken in the fourth chapter which we just heard. In all the Scriptures, you will never find a word that tells you to doubt that you are the redeemed of the Lord, to question whether you are really and truly saved, or whether you have a gracious God. Always and ever, the Lord comforts. All that brings doubt is not of God, but the fruit of the devil. It is a fruit that is eaten whenever men believe a lie, and if the lie is not countered by the antidote of truth which is God's Word, the lie will grow, and breed more lies, until it finally brings death. So it is with this lie called "once saved, always saved." Like the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it is comely to look upon, but it finally brings death, for if it is fully believed, it will lead to one of two possible results: It will make men secure in their sins so that they no longer repent and believe the Gospel; or it will lead men to despair, so that they never can be sure whether their faith is real or self-delusion.

Such is the false security which the devil has pawned off upon so many Christians. Do not be deceived by it, nor let the comfort of Christ be robbed from you, for God offers you true security, one that is not built on doubt, but upon the sure promises of His Word. Let us consider the true security which the Elect of God have in the Hands of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah begins, "In that day, shall the Branch of the Lord be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel." Here is the foundation of your security. The Branch is Christ Jesus, which sprang up from Jesse's root. He is the Lord's Branch, for the Father in Heaven is His Father from eternity. He is also the fruit of the earth, for He was born of a virgin, a natural born son of man. Therefore the Lord Jesus is both God and Man. Those who look upon Him are the remnant of Israel, all who still believe on the Lord, no matter how small a minority they may be among the thousands and millions of idol worshippers. They find

Him to be excellent and comely, that is, filled with majesty and beautiful to behold. The Lord Jesus does not frighten, but comforts. He comes to serve and to be a shepherd to His people. Everything about Him is a delight for the children of God, for He is the source of every good thing.

Here then is the difference between the true security, and the counterfeit. The counterfeit, "once saved, always saved" is an arbitrary decision by God. It is built on nothing but His whim. It has no connection at all to His boundless compassion for sinners, and His desire that all men be saved. That is why it is not true security at all. It is a counterfeit. The true security, and foundation for our salvation, is in Christ Jesus alone. It is pure and unending grace, built upon the Cross of Christ. It can no more be taken away from you, than the Cross of Christ could be wiped from history. He makes it sure by His presence among us, day and night. He is there not because we are righteous enough, but because we are sinners. He is there so that He might make us holy by washing away the filth of our sins, and purging us from dead works by the power of His Spirit. So it is that Isaiah finds in the work of Christ the reason for the holiness of God's people: "He that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem: When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning." Those who are left in Zion are the elect, all those whose names are written in the book of life, the true Israel of God, no matter where they were born, or who their parents were.

They are holy, the Lord says, and their holiness is not just something that God has announced, as if He would just wave a magic wand and cause all their sins to disappear along with their punishment. In fact, they come to the Lord, not as holy, but as sinners. He receives sinners, because it is only sinners from whom he washes away the filth of sin. The Pharisees expected that if Jesus were truly the Messiah, He would have nothing to do with sinners, but that is like saying that a real shepherd should have nothing to do with sheep. If Jesus came to wash away sin, then He has to start with sinful people. Otherwise He cannot make them clean. Otherwise, they would not need Him at all. Therefore He begins with sinners, and He washes them. He washed the children of Israel in the Red Sea when they crossed over into Sinai. He washes us in the waters of baptism. In either case, the washing is not the cleansing of the flesh, but of the heart and conscience, for by the Cross of Jesus, God has laid our sins upon Jesus, and by the grave from which He rose, God has buried them forever so that we too arise in holiness and righteousness forever.

Here is the foundation of our security, that God, in Christ Jesus, has washed away all our sins. But, you might ask, How do I know that means me? How do I know that He washed away *my* sins? Put those thoughts away, and believe what the Lord declares. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Are you a sinner? Then He came to save you. All your blood-debt of sin is purged away, for the Lord so judged His Son guilty. The Spirit of judgment and of burning was his to bear, not yours. He paid the price, and you receive the benefit.

But does this make you truly secure? Can you not fall away? Indeed you can. No man can pluck you out of the hand of God, but like the lost sheep in Jesus' parable, you can wander away, as many have. Does this mean that the Salvation of Christ was less than secure and certain? By no means, for it is still there, even though you might have left Him. God is still gracious, full of compassion for you. He has not taken Christ away from you. His Cross is still effective to forgive your sins. Christ Jesus is still there, not just waiting for you to return, but seeking you out, to bring you back to the fold so that He might rejoice with all the angels of heaven.

Jesus has promised that He will never leave you nor forsake you. He is always with his Church. Wherever two or three are gathered together in His name, He is there, in their midst. He is the pillar of smoke by day, and the pillar of fire by night among His people, for though we cannot see that particular sign with our eyes as did the children of Israel when the Lord rescued them from Egypt, He is just as present, and our constant defense and has given us other clear and certain testimonies. We can hear His Word, and can see His Sacraments. Together they are the pillars of smoke and fire. There His glory is displayed among us, so that we can be certain that He will defend us until the end. He will never cease to be our Savior. He will never cease to silence Satan when he accuses us of our sins.

The burning wrath of God threatens all the children of men, because men, by nature, are lost, and actively in rebellion against God. The day of wrath, when earth and heaven pass away, will be a day of burning and fire. Malachi says that the day is coming, which shall burn like an oven. All the proud and wicked will be a stubble set to the flame, but those believe on the name of the Lord will be sheltered from the heat. The Son of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings. He will be a tabernacle to them, a booth, or shelter, which will protect them from God's burning wrath. No storm or rain shall sweep them away. The flood which once wiped out nearly the entire human race because of their sins, will not touch those who are in Christ Jesus. They are safe. Secure. They are in His hand. Who can possibly snatch them away? No one.

That, dear friends, is true security. It is not some arbitrary decision of God. It is not found in your character or works. It is in Christ Jesus alone. Therefore cling to your Savior, and He shall never let you perish. Cherish His voice, and you shall never find a day when He remains silent. Always He will comfort you, and speak words of peace into your heart, giving you the abiding surety that you are His forever. May God grant that we sinners might find such secure comfort in Christ Jesus alone. Amen.