

Our Lord is born, and shortly after, within about two years at most, He is chased out of His homeland, has to be taken away to spare His life. He goes to Egypt, the land where the boys of His ancestors were killed under Pharaoh's edict. He is hated and rejected not only as an adult, not only in Holy Week, but already in His youth. Because our lives are not only hard when we are old and mature, we suffer not only after a certain age, lives are viciously ended not only for young men at war, but the whole lifespan of human life is, as St. Peter calls it, a fiery trial.

And the apostle says, “do not be surprised” at it. Do not be surprised when you share Christ’s sufferings. First and foremost that means suffering for the name of Christ, suffering as a Christian because you are a Christian. The Christ Child is driven into Egypt precisely because Herod hears of the birth of the King of Israel, the real king, and the imposter fears the arrival of the true king. You have enemies simply because of the fact that you confess Christ is Lord, because you believe the words of the Apostles’ Creed.

But you also share Christ’s sufferings in that what He must bear and endure in His life is a lesson in the entire human experience. He suffers everything He does, rejection, slander, mockery, senseless opposition, because that is what every human being must bear at some point. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, are subject to sin, suffering, and death. Sometimes in our fallen nature we make foolish and wicked choices and we must bear the consequences of it. Other times, because we live with fallen men, it is because of their foolishness and wickedness that we must suffer. And still yet others, simply because all things are subject to futility, suffer without any clear explanation or reason, save God’s hidden wisdom.

The boys of Bethlehem are murdered because Herod was wicked and selfish. Children today have their lives unjustly taken because men masquerading as doctors lie to women in difficult situations and say there are no other options, because civil rulers care more about puppies and eagles than unborn babies, and so fathers, without whom these children would not exist, have no say under the law regarding their own children’s lives. And husbands and wives filled with longing for children are met with disappointment, unable to have children, or they soon have their joy and excitement give way to sorrow for reasons that medical science cannot always answer.

The gift of life, what God loves to give since He began to create, how it suffers and is abused under sin, is but one example. There are those here who have not suffered the unjust or inexplicable loss of a child’s life, but there is no one here who has not suffered loss, anguish, or injustice in some way. And today your Lord Jesus reminds you that He knows what that is like. Do not think it strange that such things come upon you, but also learn from your Lord not only that He knows, but that He teaches and enables you to bear it, and He promises His will and working for your ultimate, eternal good.

And Bach, who probably better than any of us knows this truth, and who does know music better than any of us, puts pen to paper to teach us in the beauty of God’s gift of music, how to make sense of this. First, it is the open, honest complaint, not to ourselves or to the universe or to others, but to God, who sees and knows all, and who has invited and commanded His children to pray, and promised to hear. And that includes your cries of misery, the admittance that they are more powerful than you, that you are, for all your wisdom and learning, for all your smarts and wealth, powerless.

Suffering is first a preaching of the Law. That you are a sinner subject to the fallenness of a sinful world, and that you are incapable of getting yourself out of it. But that is not enough. If it were only that, we'd either become callous and uncaring, unfeeling, or we would be driven to despair. The first two movements of today's Cantata do what Scripture does, what the Law is given to do: drive us to Christ.

And from Him we hear the simple promises of His Word. In the face of all sorrows and trials that come and go, He assures us of a basic truth that never changes: "**Do not fear, I am with you. Do not give way**," that is, do not give up, do not lessen, do not grow weary, "**I am your God; I strengthen you, I help you also with the right hand of My righteousness.**" He helps you as the Righteous One who is not at all unfamiliar with what you suffer and bear, but is well-acquainted with them, has taken them into Himself, and it is He who upholds you.

The Christian believes this, knows this, confesses this, as the words of the aria just before the sermon say: "You truly speak peace to my soul, dear God, a comfort to me in my sufferings." Your Word is true, dear God, and it does give peace, it comforts me. It is our Lord's promises that strengthen and sustain us. That is not the same as God snapping His fingers and the trial immediately vanishes, He waves His hand, and the burden is lifted. St. Paul's thorn was not removed. Paul does not ultimately need it removed. What he does need is God's grace, that is sufficient. Paul is taught to believe that.

And yet the Christian is not told to shut up and take it, the aria continues as the Christian's prayer does, in bringing the voice of pain, of suffering, of crying out for rescue, for yet one more word, one more promise. And as we will then hear after the sermon, God never tires of giving them. The words of the hymn stanza confess the truth. All the devils of hell may be set against you, yet even then God will not give way. His plan and purpose in all things, His will for you, is good and gracious. That will be the end of whatever sufferings you bear.

Strengthened by this promise, faith then applies it to itself. Take comfort! Endure! Do not be crushed, for at the right time, God will restore you. How can you know this? How can you be so sure and confident that whatever brings tears now will ultimately be for your eternal good? God's own dear Son, your Jesus, even in His tender years has to experience much greater distress, when Herod in his rage, with extreme deadly danger threatens Him with murderous fists! Scarcely has He come to earth, and He must at once become a fugitive! So then, comfort yourself with this same Jesus, and believe firmly that whoever suffers here with Him will be given a share in the kingdom of heaven.

That is the promise of God applied to the Christian. Then comes faith's resolution, what the heart that has and believes this is willing and able to say: "If I have to lead my life beneath cross and affliction, yet that will cease in heaven. There is nothing but rejoicing, Jesus Himself transforms my suffering with blessed delight, with everlasting joys!"

And then faith cries out in prayer:

*Therefore I want, while I still live,  
to bear the cross joyfully after You;  
my God, make me ready to do this,  
it is always for the best!*

*Help me to deal with my situation  
so that I can accomplish my course,  
help me also to master my flesh and  
blood,  
protect me from sin and shame!*

*Keep my heart pure in faith,  
then I shall live and die for You alone;  
Jesus, my comfort, hear my desire,  
O my Savior, would that I were with  
You.*

