

The Comfort of God's sure Promise

7 September 2008

Ps. 95: 1, 3

Ps. 69: 12

Hymn 21: 3, 7

Hymn 27: 1 – 4

Ps. 118: 4, 8

Reading: Rom. 8: 1 – 39 and Form for Baptism (first part)

Text: LD 1 A

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

We read the first part of the Form for Baptism. Once more you heard what promises have been given to you and sealed to you at your baptism.

When you were baptised into the Name of the Father, God the Father testified and sealed to you that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with you. He adopted you as His child and heir, and promised to provide you with all good and avert all evil from you, or to turn it to your benefit.

When you were baptised into the Name of the Son, God the Son promised you that He washes you in His blood from all your sins and unites you with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus you are freed from your sins and accounted righteous before God.

When you were baptised into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assured you by the sacrament of baptism that He will dwell in you and make you a living member of Christ, imparting to you what you have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from your sins and the daily renewal of your life, till you shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal.

Here in LD 1 you repeat these same promises, but this time it is not God who proclaims these promises to you; this time it is you who confess these promises as your own.

It has been given to you, and therefore you confess it as your own.

These promises are sure, therefore you are fully comforted.

Yes, in LD 1 we confess with full assurance that we believe the promise that has been given to us, and that this promise, the promise of the gospel, is our only comfort in life and in death.

Dear congregation, in the words of the apostle Peter, God has given us “**exceedingly great and precious promises**” (2 Peter 2: 4). God has promised us full salvation and eternal life in our Lord Jesus Christ. He sealed it to us and He proclaims it to us Sunday after Sunday.

Now, these promises, as formulated in the Form for Baptism, are simply a summary of the whole gospel. The promise of the covenant and the promise of the gospel is one and the same thing.

The **gospel** promise comes to us as **covenant** promise, and therefore the promise of the gospel, the promise of the covenant, comes to us with the call to repent and believe. Only those who believe in Christ, will receive the fulfilment of these promises.

Or positively: All who believe the promise will receive its fulfilment.

Now, there are many people who call themselves Christian but who do not have this assurance and comfort of LD 1. Some have a false assurance and others have no assurance at all. So then, how can **you** confess these words of LD 1? On which grounds do you make this confession? On what do you base your assurance and comfort?

Dear congregation, here in LD 1 we simply confess that we believe what God has promised us. God made this promise to you personally at your baptism and sealed it to you, and Sunday after Sunday He proclaims this promise to you through the preaching of the gospel.

In faith we simply receive what God has given us.

We confess here in LD 1 that we believe the promises which He has given us.

And because the promise is sure, therefore our comfort is sure.

I proclaim God's Word to you with the theme:

The comfort of God's sure promise!

We will note...

1. That we confess the promise to be our own
2. The comfort of Christ's atonement
3. The comfort that continues to flow from Christ

In the first place we note that...

We confess the promise to be our own

The LORD said to Abraham:

“...I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.” – Gen. 17: 7

That is the summary of God's covenant promise: I will be your God and the God of your descendants.

If anyone receives God as **his** God, then he received the sum total of all blessings. Because: God Himself is the fountain of all good.

God made this covenant also with us and our children. That same covenant which God made with Abraham and his children applies also to the New Testament believer and his children. The apostle Paul writes to the Galatians and says:

“...if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” – Gal. 3: 29

It is an eternal covenant. All who belong to Christ are counted as Abraham’s seed; all who belong to Christ are heirs of the same promise that God made to Abraham.

Yes, through Christ we became heirs of the same promises that God made to Abraham and to his seed.

Now, this promise is repeated throughout all of Scripture until we finally read of its glorious fulfilment on the new earth:

“...Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” – Rev. 21: 3

There you have the final fulfilment of the covenant promise: God will be with us and be our God, and we will dwell with Him in the glory of His presence forever.

The New Testament calls this promise: the gospel.

The covenant promise finds its realisation and fulfilment in and through Christ. It is only in and through Christ that God becomes our God.

The covenant promise and the gospel is one and the same thing: God has become our God. Or in the language of the New Testament: God has reconciled us to Himself through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, this promise – the promise of life in communion with God through Christ His Son – has been **given** to you and **sealed** to you.

Therefore you may never doubt whether the promise is for you.

The same promise which was given and sealed to you at your baptism is also proclaimed to you Sunday after Sunday: the gospel of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if there may be any visitor present this afternoon, who was never baptised, but hears the proclamation of this gospel, then he too is called by God to believe the promise.

Thus we confess in the Canons of Dort:

“The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. **This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel**, together with the command to repent and believe” – Canons of Dort, chapter 2, art. 5.

Whoever hears the gospel is called to believe the gospel. Whoever receives the proclamation of this promise is called to repent and to believe this promise.

If you hear the proclamation of this gospel then the promise is, through the preaching, given to you.

Yes, whoever hears the gospel receives the promise.

And thus we also confess:

“...as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him...” – Canons of Dort, chapter 3/4, art. 8.

All who hear the gospel are seriously called by God.

All who hear the gospel receives the promise – together with the call to repent and believe the promise.

You may never doubt this promise, because God sealed it to you and He proclaims it to you.

It has been revealed, it has been sealed, it has been proclaimed to you.

The promise is surely for **you**, therefore you may and must confess it with full assurance as your own.

Now, it is this **revealed** promise, this promise that has been given and sealed to you, that constitutes our only comfort.

Note also that LD 1 puts the question to you personally: What is **your** only comfort? The question is not: How does God save people? Nor is the question: What is the gospel?

No, the answer to the question is a personal confession of assurance.

With Lords' Day 1 we are not simply making a doctrinal statement, but we confess our personal **assurance**: I belong to Christ. God has given me eternal life.

Lord's Day 1 is also not a starting point, a foundation, on which **we** now have to start building our comfort. No, with the words of LD 1 we confess a complete assurance which is already our own. There is nothing more to seek, and nothing fuller or more complete than this comfort which we confess to be our own.

The promise of eternal life in Christ is for each one who is called by the preaching of the gospel. The promise has been given to you personally, and in faith you have received the promise as your own.

But, there are people who think that God has made His covenant only with the elect, and that the promise of the covenant – yes, the promise of the gospel – is in reality only given to the elect.

Now, that is a gross error that robs us of any true comfort; as we will see in a moment.

It is true that the promise will be **fulfilled** only in the elect, but it is not true that the promise is **given** only to the elect.

The promise itself is given to each one to whom the gospel is proclaimed, and not only to the elect.

When we fail to make a distinction between covenant and election then we fall into gross errors.

Your baptism did not seal your election. Nor did your baptism seal your regeneration.

At your baptism God testified and sealed to you that He established His eternal covenant with you, and therefore also that the promises of the covenant are given and sealed to you.

But the promise of the covenant is not an unconditional assurance of eternal life. It is a promise in the context of the covenant, and its fulfilment is conditioned by the call to repent and believe. You will only receive the fulfilment of the promise if you believe the promise.

The promise of the covenant is not that you are an elect unto eternal life. Baptism does not seal your election; it seals the promise of the covenant.

Here in LD 1 you now confess the promise of the covenant to be your only comfort. You are able to confess this because you take the revealed and sure promise of the covenant as your starting point. That sure and revealed promise which God has given and sealed to you, you embrace as your own. And it is only when you take in this way the revealed covenant promise of God as your starting point, as the basis of your assurance, that your faith is further strengthened and nurtured by the doctrine of your unconditional election.

But whoever takes election as his starting point, so that he first wants the assurance of his election before he believes the revealed promise of the covenant, has put the cart before the horses. He will get nowhere.

How can you be assured of your election **before** you believe God's revealed promises?

It can never be.

You first have to believe the sure and revealed promises of God, and then you will be assured of your election.

Brothers and sisters, if the promise of the gospel is given only to the elect, how then will you know whether the promise is also for you?

It is exactly at this point that many have gone astray. It is at this very point that Satan launches his fiercest attacks. How do you know that the promise of salvation is also for you?

Dear congregation, it is the result of a gross error when a covenant child starts to question whether the promise has truly been given to him. How dare you doubt what God has proclaimed to you? He sealed the promise to you, and He proclaims the same promise to you as often as you receive the preaching in which the gospel is proclaimed to you.

It is unbelief to doubt that which God has proclaimed and sealed to you.

The promise of the gospel *is* for you, and you are called by God to believe the promise.

If you hear the gospel, then you are called. If you hear the gospel, then the promise is for you; then you are seriously called by God to repent and to believe the promise.

When someone rejects the promise in unbelief, then he will indeed perish under the wrath of God; but that does not mean that the promise was not truly given to him.

Now, what happened in church history when certain people taught that the promise of the gospel is only for the elect? The result was twofold. Some simply presumed that they are an elect unto eternal life because they were baptised. They presumed. Now, to “presume” is not the same as to confess. To presume is also not the same as to believe.

They presumed their election because they were baptised, by they were not sure of either.

Because: if God would indeed make His covenant only with the elect, then the baptism of those who perish was never a true baptism. And if your baptism is maybe not a true baptism, how then can you be assured that the promise of the covenant was truly sealed you?

So they “presumed”. But that is no faith. And if anyone had any assurance on that basis, then it was a false assurance based on a twisting of the gospel.

Others tried to find some assurance of their election by looking into themselves whether they could find any proof of their election. They thought that they first have to find out whether they are elect before they could make the promise their own! **If** they come to know that they are an elect unto eternal life, **then** they will know that the promise is also for them!

What a fatal error!

What a devilish trick of Satan!

From this error the question was born: “Who gives you the right to confess these promises as your own?”

Nowhere does Scripture call you by your name and declare to you personally: you are an elect unto eternal life. And there is no sacrament to seal our election.

You are assured of your election only because you believe **the revealed promise** of the covenant.

Those who try to take God’s secret counsel as starting point, puts the cart before the horses. And the result is twofold. On the one hand people then start to dig into themselves in search of any evidence of their election. The result is mysticism. They reckon that only if they can come to a profound and supernatural experience, or maybe a special revelation, then can they start to think that they are maybe elect and that the promise is maybe also for them. Even when they were baptised and the promise visibly sealed to them, they still do not know whether the promise is truly for them! Why? Because only the baptism of the elect is a true baptism, they reckon, and the baptism of all the others is only a fake baptism with fake promises.

Some even described the stages through which you have to go in a process of self-examination in search for signs of your election. Some had a recipe of stages through which you have to pass. The first stage would then be a true conversion. But to make sure that it is really a true conversion it had to be real intense. You first had to experience hell itself, you have to come to such a sense of your hopeless depravity and of God’s wrath on you that you, as it were, descend into the pit. **Such** an experience would be a sign of true conversion, they reckoned. Only after that can a next stage follow of heavenly joy inexpressible – **such** an ecstasy of joy as to remove all doubt of your election!

Dear congregation, such mysticism, seeking for assurance in your own feelings and experiences, can **never** lead you to the assurance in Christ. It can **never** lead you to the comfort of LD 1.

But we said that the result was twofold. The error, which taught that the promise of the gospel is given only to the elect, also had a different effect on others. On the one hand it led to mysticism seeking for signs of your election in yourself, but on the other hand it also worked fatalism and passiveness. You simply had to sit still and wait to see whether you are an elect – if you are an elect, then God will sometime start to fulfil His promises in your life – but until then you can do nothing but wait! In the meantime you are not guilty for not believing, for you are not allowed to make something your own before you know that it **is** for you!

In that way **unbelief** and **doubt** can even be seen as an attribute of a humble man who does not arrogantly make promises his own which is not for him!

Dear congregation, do you see the wickedness of such error?

This is the crucial point at which the paths separate. Here we stand at the crossroad. Do you embrace the sure promise of God as your only comfort, or do you also seek some assurance in yourself – in your exercise of faith, in your efforts to believe, in your experiences, in your feelings?

Where is the comfort? Is it in yourself; or is it in the sure promise of God?

To embrace the sure promise of God as your only comfort – that is faith.

To seek the comfort in yourself is unbelief.

To doubt God's sure and revealed promise is breaking His covenant.

Brother, sister, when you hear the gospel, then you may not ask: "Is it also for me?" No, when you hear the gospel you are commanded to embrace as your own that which is promised to you!

I will not ask whether the promise is for me when God Himself has revealed, proclaimed and sealed it to me. I will not seek any qualification in myself before I embrace this complete and only comfort, for there *is* no qualification to be found in me, except that which **disqualifies** me. We are to embrace the promise, not because of a qualifying deed or feeling or experience *in* us, or *of* us, but simply because God calls us and commands us to believe His promise!

Yes, the promise is also for you.

And that is what you confess here in LD 1. The promise is mine.

And since the promise is sure, my comfort is complete.

The promise itself is my only comfort.

So then, the comfort of LD 1 is not only to know that Christ died for the sins of the world, but to know that He died for **your** sins. And how do you know for sure that He died for **your** sins? **By embracing the promise!** The promise is for me! Therefore I embrace it. The promise is for you.

You would have noticed by now that our confession uses the word *comfort* in a specific way.

The word “comfort”, as it is used in our confession, is the comfort of assurance. It is a comfort that has the firm and sure promise of God as its content. This comfort is not first of all a feeling, but a sure knowledge. This comfort does indeed bring true and heavenly joy, but in this order: first assurance, and **then** the joy that flows from the assurance!

It can never be the other way around.

We need true assurance in order to have true joy.

How can you be glad about your salvation if you are not sure of your salvation?

Our comfort is not first of all a feeling. Our comfort is first of all the **guarantee** and the **assurance** of the promise itself. Our comfort does not exist first of all in feeling and

experience, but in the **revealed** promise of God. And from that revealed guarantee and assurance flows our joy.

Dear congregation, the comfort of LD 1 does not consist in our capacity to exercise faith. It is not our **act** of believing that comforts us, but the mighty works of God's salvation.

The gospel is not a secret recipe, or a set of instructions or a method by which **we** can gain life in Christ. The gospel is the proclamation of salvation which **God** has worked in Christ.

Our comfort is what God has worked and what **He** has given us in Christ.

My comfort is not that Christ made salvation possible for me. My only comfort is that He has indeed saved me.

Our comfort is not the possibility of salvation in Christ, but the assurance of salvation in Christ. It is an assurance that rests fully on what He has done for me. We receive this comfort by believing the revealed promise of the gospel, yes, by believing the very words of Scripture as it spells out the mighty deeds of salvation which **God** has wrought – what He has wrought **for** us in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, the comfort and assurance of our salvation is found outside of ourselves in what God has done for us.

That is our only comfort in life and in death.

In life and in death – what exactly does that mean?

It means that this is **all** that comforts us, and that it comforts us in **every** situation of life.

It is not a comfort that relates only to a certain religious sphere of our life. It is our only comfort in every sphere of life, in every aspect of our life, in every situation of life. There is **no** comfort apart from this comfort. It is all and everything in all of our life, that through our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ we belong to God – of Him, through Him, unto Him.

Brothers and sisters, there is no comfort to be found in this world, or in the things of this world (1 John 2: 15). There is no comfort to be found outside of Christ.

When your child dies, this is your only comfort; when you are afflicted by persecution, this is your only comfort; when you suffer ill health, it is your only comfort that you belong to Christ. Your comfort is not that the persecution ceases, or that your health improves. No, you are fully comforted even when the persecution does not stop and when your health does not improve. You are fully comforted in all situations, in life and in death, not because of improved circumstances, but because in life and death you are fully assured that God adopted you in Christ and made you heir of all the heavenly riches in Christ Jesus.

It is a comfort that applies to every situation and to every aspect of our life, for we are assured that God will work *all* things according to His promise. In all situations we are fully comforted because we know that nothing will ever again separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Knowing this, we also do some calculation: our present affliction does not weigh up against the eternal weight of glory which God has prepared for us in Christ!

And so, in all situations of life and even in death we are fully comforted by this most precious and glorious promise that has been revealed and sealed and proclaimed to us.

There is no other comfort besides this comfort. That we belong to Christ is not only our highest comfort. Every moment of the day, in every situation of life, it is my *only* comfort that I belong to Christ.

All the blessings of God's grace flows to me from Christ alone.

In the second place we note...

The comfort of Christ's atonement

Our whole comfort is summarised in this: that I belong to Christ. But what exactly does it mean? What does it mean that I am not my own but His? It means that God has adopted us as sons. It means that we are reconciled to God. It means the ransom for our sins has been paid. I belong to Him **because**:

“He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood...”

With the confession that we do not belong to ourselves but to Christ, we do not in the first place speak of a **feeling** of sonship, nor of an **awareness** of sonship, but we confess the **adoption** as sons which is an act of God through Christ. Our comfort is that God has reconciled us to Himself and adopted us to the position as sons.

Yes, the Holy Spirit who was given to us confirms this promise of adoption in our heart and testifies with our spirit that we are sons of God, so that we call Him “Father”. But **how** does the Holy Spirit testify in our heart? He testifies in our heart with the exact words of the revealed promise!

Our adoption as sons is a position which is not our own by nature, and which we cannot attain by our efforts. Our Lord Jesus Christ bought us with a price, He paid the ransom with His own blood; **He** made us sons and heirs of the Father.

The Scripture reference at the words “I am not my own” is given as 1 Cor. 6: 19, 20:

“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s”.

That we are not our own is not the result of our efforts to crucify ourselves, or the result of our progress in sanctification, but the work of Christ who from beginning to end has acted as our Mediator and Surety. That is, says the apostle Paul, why we are not our own:

“For you were bought with a price....” (verse 20).

Our sins had to be paid for. It was our sins that separated us from God. It was our sins that made us enemies of God. And God's justice requires that our sins have to be punished to the full and that we render to Him complete obedience.

"God demands that His justice be satisfied. Therefore we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another" – LD 5.

Our only comfort is that our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ made the payment **for** us.

"He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood..." (LD 1)

"...the punishment for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed"
(Isaiah 53: 5)

He gave Himself as a propitiation for our sins. **Therefore** we belong to Him.

What then is our only comfort? Not that we made good progress in drawing near to God. Not that we have become worthy of sonship; nor anything that we may find or see in ourselves. Our only comfort is that God adopted us as sons through Jesus Christ who fully paid for all our sins.

And then LD 1 continues. The work of Christ did not stop at atonement. He also sets me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me. He also works in me by His Holy Spirit. He also sanctifies me to the glory of God.

We note this in the third place...

The comfort that continues to flow from Christ

“He...has set me free from all the power of the devil” (LD 1)

“Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” – John 8: 34 – 36.

We are no longer slaves of sin. We no longer live in bondage to sin. Christ has set us free.

Christ died...

“...that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” – Hebr. 2: 14, 15

And again we read:

“...For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” – 1 John 3: 8.

Whoever belongs to Christ is no longer a slave of sin, and no longer continues to *live* in sin.

Furthermore, Christ also preserves us. And to describe the absolute way in which He does this, our confession refers to Mt. 10: 30:

“...the very hairs of your head are all numbered”

Without the will of my Father not a hair can fall from my head. But note the context of this preservation. The Lord says this in a context of persecution. His disciples will be hated and killed. But know for sure that even your hair is numbered! If not even a sparrow falls to the

ground apart from the will of our heavenly Father, much less, says He, will anything happen to us – or even to one of our hair! – apart from His will. We are completely safe in His hands – even in death!

His preservation then does not mean that no sorrow or pain or persecution will come my way in this life. No, on the contrary, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3: 12). Our comfort is not that we will have an easy life as Christians, or a prosperous life, or a peaceful life. Rather, the life of the Christian would be the most pitiable of all if this life would be all that we had (1 Cor. 15: 19).

Our comfort is that *in the midst* of all struggles and persecutions, trials and hardships, hatred and strife, sorrow and death, we remain completely safe in the hands of our almighty and faithful Father. Even the *worst* thing that can happen to us in this life, He will make subject to serve our salvation (Rom. 8: 28)!

Brothers and sisters, now that we are reconciled to God through the blood of Christ, now that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ who bought us with His blood, all the spiritual and heavenly blessings continue to flow to us in Christ. He dwells in us through His Spirit and assures us of eternal life. Yes, also the gift of the Spirit, and of faith, and of assurance, *He* earned for me and works in me.

His work as my Saviour does not stop at atonement, but He acts also as my Saviour when He makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him. I am also comforted by His work of sanctification as He renews and restores my whole life, as He raises me unto a new life of obedience to the glory of God.

He is a complete Saviour in whom we have complete salvation. To Him I belong with body and soul, both in life and in death.

Amen.

