

Seventh Sunday of Easter – Epistle

THE OVERWHELMING RESCUE OF GOD’S TESTIMONY

1 John 5:9-13

Seventh Sunday of Easter Analysis by James Squire

9If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. 10Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. 11And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

DIAGNOSIS: Overwhelmed by God’s Testimony

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Besieged by God’s Testimony*

Human testimony is not all it is cracked up to be. Human testimony is what we say and do based on whatever inspires us. The cycle of hatred, the love of the world, the neglect of the neighbor – these things are our public testimony. God’s testimony is greater (v. 9). It always stands in judgment over our human testimony. Every time our actions speak louder than words, God’s testimony speaks the loudest of all, and we are

conscious of it. We hate, someone hates us back, and sooner or later comes the question: when is it going to stop? We love the world, the world disappoints us, we feel disheartened and trapped by broken promises, and sooner or later comes the question: whom can we rely on? We neglect the neighbor, the neglected become the angry that grow up in our midst, and sooner or later comes the question: how did things get this way? Each of these questions is inevitable because its source is God, and his testimony is too great for us to overcome.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Hatred of God's Testimony*

The reason why God's testimony overpowers us is because we "do not believe in [him]" (v. 10). Part of the cycle of sin is the overwhelming temptation to "deceive ourselves" (1:8) into thinking that all we have to do is figure out some way not to screw up next time. This conundrum, born of the "can-do" attitude that is so American (actually, it is such a pervasive sin that we Americans don't have a monopoly on it) embeds itself into our daily routine. And when we get going faster and faster on the "can-do" treadmill of self-justification that never stops, we are blind to the fact that the real problem is we do not believe in God in the first place. We'd like to appease him perhaps, but the "truth" is not in us (1:8). Rather, we have traded the truth for a lie (Romans 1:25). The truth about us is that we believe in ourselves, in national pride, in an economic system, or whatever it is that we belong to. The truth about us is that we really don't want to have anything to do with God's testimony, and aren't pleased at all that his testimony is greater (v. 9).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Excluded by God's Testimony*

Not only does God's testimony overpower us, but it excludes us. We do not have life because we do not have the Son (v. 12). Our

rejection of God's testimony leaves us excluded also from life with him. We may yet achieve a life without God's testimony, but it will be no life at all. We may end up longing for the good old days when we felt hounded by God's testimony. God doesn't like to be made a liar (v. 10), but he can survive that. We can't. In fact, if we insist, there may come a day when God gives up the lie and says, "Have it your way." Our refusal to be loved in God's peculiar way has fatal consequences. God forbid we should ever see them come to fruition.

PROGNOSIS: Rescued by God's Testimony

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Death-Defying Testimony*

Just what exactly is this testimony of God that overpowers and hounds us? To be sure it involves judging and condemning all that is wrong with the world, all the badness we can see with our own eyes and feel with our own hearts. But all this is implicit for the author of this letter. When he feels pressed to get explicit, all of that implicit testimony is consistently trumped with the good news: "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (v. 11). What finally matters to 1 John is that this Son came into our world, into our lives, into our hearts "in the flesh" (4:2), and he brought eternal life with him as a gift for us. He took on our excluded flesh and life and made it his own, giving us his life with God in return. This is what makes God's testimony so great: that he has testified to his Son – in fact his testimony is his Son (v. 9). The bottom line for God and for the author of this letter is that our life – our livelihood, our being, our identity, our essence, everything that is the epitome of true existence – is safely kept and nourished in his Son, and it is for us. In his Son, God includes us in the full-bodied sense of that word. He overwhelms us with his testimony, and that is what brings us back from the dead to new life in him!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Holying Testimony*

But God's testimony doesn't stop there. Initially the Son is the holy place for us. But through faith in his Son, God builds a holy place in us. His testimony – His Son! – lives in our heart (v. 10). His testimony grows on us and makes a believer out of us. Our corrupt "can-do" attitude is replaced by God's preemptive assertion in us that we are his children (3:2). Where we are prone to exert ourselves in pursuit of an improved life, the spirit of God's testimony works in us to assure us of our place with him. In his Son, God switches off our treadmill and invites us into his loving arms, secure in the knowledge that we belong to him.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Truthful Testimony*

In public what we still have is Human testimony, and it is still what we say and do based on whatever inspires us, but now our human testimony springs from God's testimony to us and within us. We are no longer hounded by God's testimony because it has been embodied within us. We become like the evangelist who "write[s] these things to [others] who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that [they] may know that [they] have eternal life" (v. 13). We are called to proclaim this in-fleshed Gospel to all kinds of people in our own communities who are still quite tempted by the "can-do" attitude to think that such testimony is not needed on a daily basis. Martin Luther, who had already seen the doors of heaven open to him in his new understanding of Romans 1:16-17, curiously asserted in the preface to his Large Catechism that he could study the catechism for the rest of his life and still not learn all that God wanted to teach him. And that catechism made this Gospel, which growing numbers of people within the church seem to think "we already know full well," very explicit. The Son-in-the-Flesh gospel is not something we learn once and then don't have to learn again

or testify to on a regular basis, as if we were confirmands “graduating” from study of the Christian Gospel on to other more interesting things. This gospel is the “cabbage” we should be only too happy to “chew twice” and much more than that. Every time we proclaim it to others from the pulpit, at the communion rail, in hymns, in our daily work, no matter what daily life context we find ourselves in, this Gospel has the power to assure others that they do indeed have eternal life (v. 13). It is the truth about us and about them, and this Truth accepted death in order to live in the hearts of others, just as He lives in us (v. 10).