The goodness of the LORD is that we are not consumed, and His compassion has no end. They are new every morning, and His faithfulness is great. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore, I will hope in Him." The LORD is good to those who wait for Him and the soul that seeks Him. It is good to be patient and hope for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear a yoke in his youth; let him sit alone and be patient when He lays it on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust, waiting in hope. Let him offer his cheek to the one who beats him, let him be filled with disgrace. For the LORD will not reject you forever, but first He afflicts you, then He has compassion according to His abundant goodness. For He does not willingly bring grief or affliction to the children of men. [Lamentations 3:22-33]

In the Name + of Jesus. Amen. There's a typically American trend among Christians that we're an outgoing, upbeat, nice group of folks, that the stone atheist, when he catches his first glimpse of our soul-searching gaze and rigored smile will be compelled to follow us into the closest church, like a spoiled child following the siren song of an ice cream truck down the street. This ethos of *"nice"* is a monument to all the rancid genes and broken chromosomes in our church that corrupt the possibilities of pure, true Gospel preaching; it's a foul caricature of ourselves, it's got no soul, no inner conviction, and it screams, *"I've got the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad."*

The Christian Church doesn't do *"nice,"* not if it's about preaching Christ. In the Church, when we speak of Christ we inevitably speak about affliction, the yoke of grief, of God's goodness and compassion which are new every morning. But this isn't a message people can call *"nice."* And why would they? The message of the Cross is about affliction, grief, disgrace, compassion, and God's goodness which is only revealed to us in the midst of suffering and conflict. It's a word of death and resurrection. It announces that to be raised up into the new creation, we don't need to be nice, good, holy, smart, accountable or even faithful: we need only to be dead. How could it not meet with resistance outside and inside a church who can count the cost of being *"nice,"* but for whom God suffering, dead, and raised from death has no value?

The message of the Cross -- of death and resurrection -- meets resistance from both inside and outside the Church (not to mention within each and every one of us) because God's message isn't a nice message, it's a foolish message, through and through. It's foolishness because God isn't for first place finishers, winners, heroes, or living legends: He's for suffering and conflicted people. Christ afflicted on His Cross, suffering our punishment that we may be set free from cheapjack living to be children of God. He meets us in our suffering and conflicts not in the promise to take them away, He's simply always with us, in death and in life.

The typical American idea of the Messiah, however, is not the rejected Jesus, but Superman. You don't want a Savior who does a stupid thing like suffering, dying, and rising from the dead. You want one who never dies. But there's more to it than that. You want a Superman who saves you from burning buildings, but Jesus will save you from the fires of hell. You want a Savior who keeps you from having to die, but Jesus will keep you from eternal death. You want to be saved from discomfort, pain, sickness, and economic insecurity, but Jesus saves you from slavery to

the knee-crawling, fork-tongued liar who causes these things. You want to be saved from unhappiness? Jesus will give you joy!

Therefore, answers (or lack of answers) to prayers for help are a problem only when you look to God as a Superman, or worse, a divine vending machine programmed to dispense Cokes, cigarettes, lost keys, and freedom from acid reflux to anyone who has the right coins. But we don't tell God who He is. He tells us. His chief concern is to be Himself for you.

In Luke 12, for example, Jesus says to His little flock, *"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after these things do not have anything more to do. But I will show you whom you should fear: fear the one who has authority, after the killing, to throw you into hell! Yes, I tell you, fear this one! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten in the sight of God. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered! Do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge him before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God."*

Therefore, first, you are to be faithful in affliction and disgrace. You are called to hope, and only to hope, that is, believe God's promises. You aren't called to know, or be clever, or proficient, or energetic, or talented, or well-adjusted. Your vocation is simply to be faithful to the mystery of Jesus' coming in death and resurrection, in His coming to you through earthly words, water, bread, and wine. What the world needs to hear isn't any of our ideas, bright or dim: none of those can save a single soul. Rather, it needs to hear – and above all to see – our commitment to waiting for, and waiting on, the only Lord who has the keys of death [Revelation 1:18].

Second, you are to be innocent as doves and wise as serpents. You are to be considered fools by the world for relying on God for every need of body and soul, rich or poor, in joy or grief, not foolishly thinking that salvation can come to you or anyone as a result of your lifestyle. The world is already drowning in its efforts at life; it doesn't need lifeguards who swim to it carrying the barbells of moral and spiritual effort. Christians are to come honestly, empty-handed to the world, because anyone who comes bearing more than the foolish yoke of the Cross – of the preaching of the Word of the Cross [1 Corinthians 1:18, 21] – has missed completely the foolishness of God that is wiser than men.

The hopeful man, therefore, is the one who knows that God has stood all known values on their heads – that, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 1:26ff., God has not chosen the wise, or the mighty, or the socially adept, but rather He's chosen what the world considers moronic in order to shame the wise, and what the world considers weak in order to shame the strong. Christians are worth their salt only if they believe that God deals out salvation solely through the madmen and the nobodies of the world, through, in short, the last, the least, the lost, the littlest, and the dead. If you think God is waiting for you to provide Him with a classier stable of help, you should do

everybody a favor and get out of the Church and into church politics. Reward yourself with less foolish work …

And thirdly, after all the years the church has suffered under *"nice"* preachers and winning orators, under compelling pulpiteers and clerical bigmouths with egos to match, how good to hear that Jesus expects His Church to be nothing more than a faithful household of God that comes to the table joyfully singing, *"The LORD is my portion."*

This is the God who sets out a heavenly feast every time the Church gathers in His Name. Not a gourmet chef, not a banquet manager, not a caterer to thousands, just a Gospel pot-rattler who can turn out a decent, nourishing meal once a week. And not even a whole meal, perhaps; only the right food at the proper time. The portion the LORD Jesus sets out is His body and blood, no more or less. And the sermon? The Church is sent to deliver food, not flash; Gospel, not uplift. And you don't even have to like it. If it's good food at the right time, you can bellyache all you want, as long as you get enough death and resurrection. And some day you may even realize that in your afflictions and grief you've not been consumed, but well fed by the good, faithful Word of God which is new every morning.

Therefore, *"be patient and hope for the salvation of the LORD ... For the LORD will not reject you forever, but first He afflicts you, then He has compassion according to His abundant goodness."*

Amen.