

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.⁵ And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (NIV 84)

Theme: Rejoice in Suffering

Did you notice something missing from the worship service today? Today, we didn't sing the general verse of the day. We skip it during the season of Lent. Why? Because it contains alleluias and we don't sing alleluias during Lent. This is the same reason why we will sing the first stanza of hymn 317 instead of "Thank the Lord" today after communion. But why don't we sing alleluias during lent? Alleluia means, "praise the Lord." Since Lent is a season of somberness and repentance as we contemplate our sins, we omit songs of praise from our worship service during this season. This is what Christian churches have done for centuries before us.

We may not sing jubilant songs of joy during Lent, we still rejoice. For the joy of faith remains undiminished throughout the year—for now it's just muted and quiet. And every once in awhile we do sing a song of praise. One of our distribution hymns for the Lord's Supper today

has the refrain, "thousand, thousand thanks shall be, dearest Jesus, unto thee." You see, we can still rejoice in Lent because we know what Jesus' suffering and death means to us. And because we know what Jesus' suffering did for us, we don't have to worry when we suffer through this life. So today we see that we can rejoice in suffering.

This world is not an easy one to live in. We suffer all the time. Just like Jesus suffered, we too suffer. Jesus told us this was going to be the case. **If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first.** We suffer for being Christians. We are persecuted just like Jesus was. Chances are, we won't be murdered like Jesus. We probably won't be beaten like many other Christians because of our faith. But we will be mocked and ridiculed. We will be looked down upon as ignorant and gullible. People call us intolerant of other peoples' beliefs and lifestyles. They try to force us to do things that are contrary to God's Word.

Of course, not every time we suffer is it because we are Christians. We often suffer because we live in a sinful world. It is a world full of hate, pain, and toil—no matter who you believe in. It is a world that full of disease and sickness. Financial failures. Stress at work. Family issues. Personal problems. There are many ways we suffer in our life. Some of them are because we are Christians, others are not. Some of it we bring on ourselves, some of it we don't.

And what do we do when we suffer here on this earth? First we try to get past it ourselves. We try to figure it out on our own. And we think we can do it for awhile. We are proud and arrogant. We hate to admit when we need help. But soon we must come to that conclusion. It doesn't matter what you are suffering through. We can't get through it on our own. We need help.

So we look for someone else to help us. We visit the doctor. And then a specialist. And then even more specialists. We visit a psychiatrist. Or a counselor of some kind. We decide to sit down with a financial planner. Or anybody else who is able to help us with whatever problem we may have.

But what if nobody can help us? We have an incurable disease. The cancer has spread throughout our body. The marriage is beyond repair. We are too far into debt. Then we start to fall into despair. We

think that our life as we know it is over. No one to help us. We have no one who cares about us. And we complain about God. Why did he let this happen? Why doesn't he take away my suffering? Why isn't he on my side?

At times our lives may seem like the season of lull. Sad and somber—no Alleluias here. Yet, even while we suffer we are able to sing praises to God—“thousand, thousand thanks shall be, dearest Jesus, unto thee.” For Christ suffered for us.

At times it may seem as if you are all alone. That God doesn't care about you and has no idea that you are suffering. But God is with you every step of the way. He knows that you are suffering and what it is like to suffer. For Christ suffered too. That is our focus on the Wednesdays of Lent. We talk about the last few hours of his life. How he was betrayed, arrested, and put on illegal trial. He was denied, mocked, and spit upon. Flogged, crowned with thorns, and crucified.

And on that cross he took all our sins upon himself. He became guilty of every single thing you have ever done wrong or will ever do. And not just your sins, but the sins of the whole world. Because of this he was rejected by his Father. He suffered through the pain and agony of hell. He did this all for you. It was for you that he willingly suffered and died. It was for you that he suffered through hell. He did this not because you have earned or deserved it. But simply out of his love and mercy—so that you wouldn't have to die and suffer eternally. Christ did this for us because we couldn't do it ourselves. **For while we were still helpless, at the appointed moment, Christ died for the ungodly.** Notice what Paul calls us, the ungodly. For that is what we are by nature. We are his enemies. We hate God and want nothing to do with him or his Son. His word is offensive to us. And contrary to our reason. Our hearts are set against him from the start. We are anything but Christians.

And that is why Paul calls us helpless. Because we were born into sin there is nothing that we can do about it. We can't choose to believe in Christ. We can't obey God without faith. There is nothing we can do that is pleasing in God's sight by nature. No matter how hard we try, we can't convince God to save us. By all means, we were helpless. We were powerless. Unable to save ourselves.

So Christ saved us. He suffered and died to do what we couldn't. He lived a perfect life so we could have his. We may be powerless, but Christ isn't. Through him we have defeated our sinful nature. We have defeated death. Through him we are pleasing to God. Through him we have a perfect life and will live in heaven forever.

What is so amazing about Christ's suffering, is that he suffered for horrible miserable sinners. As Paul points out, **Rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die.** But Jesus didn't die for good people. He died for his enemies. His suffering is filled with love. He didn't die because he liked us. Not because we deserved it. He didn't put his life on the line like a husband would for his wife. Or like a Mother for her children. No, he suffered for those who hate him. For those who constantly sin against him.

And that is love. As Paul says, **God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!** It is often said that “God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.” But that isn't entirely accurate. We should say: “God hates the sin and hates the sinner. And yet he still shows love to us.” God showed us the ultimate example of love. Christ gave up his life for you and me. For sinners, he suffered and died.

Because Jesus suffered and died for us we are now considered righteous before God. This isn't the case without Christ. Because of our sin we deserve his punishment. We deserve to be hit with the full wrath of God. That means we deserve to suffer with the devil forever. We should be sent to hell forever. But through Christ we are considered righteous before God. He does not count our sins against us. Rather we are looked upon as holy, just like his Son. And so we have escaped the wrath of God. We won't be punished eternally. But we will live with him in heaven forever.

And because we are no longer considered sinners before God, we have been reconciled to him. No longer are we his enemies. No longer are we hostile toward him. But we are now his children. Our relationship has been restored to the way it was at creation. We are holy and sinless before him. And because of all these things we rejoice. We rejoice in Christ. For it is him who died for us helpless sinners. It is through him that we are reconciled to God.

Because of what Christ has done for us we can rejoice. We rejoice in all things. Including when we suffer. We don't have to worry or fall into despair when we suffer. We don't have to complain to God. Because it is a good thing suffer. Now, we are not gluttons for punishment. We don't search for it or long to suffer. But we don't have to fret about it either. For as Christians we realize that suffering benefits us.

But how can suffering be a good thing? Because it makes our faith stronger. When we suffer we realize how helpless we really are. We are reminded that we can't do anything on our own. That we don't control anything. That no matter how hard we try we can't save ourselves. And so we despair in ourselves. And look toward Christ. For he is the one who is able to save us. To declare us righteous before him. And to reconcile us to himself. The affliction that we suffer through, it **produces endurance (or perseverance), which produces proven character, and proven character produces hope.** So our suffering leads us to hope in Christ—for he alone can help us. And knowing this, leads us to endure any type of hardship. And this hope is not wishful thinking. But is a sure conviction. It is knowing that we are saved. It is knowing that through Christ we are going to live in heaven forever. For our eternal life doesn't depend on us. If that were the case we would never be sure. There would be no hope to have. But we do have hope through Christ. We have hope for our eternal life rests not on us, but on God himself. So as we suffer we have nothing to worry about. We will live in heaven forever. And there in heaven we will have no more suffering. We will have nothing that causes us problems. Because the Holy Spirit has worked faith into our hearts we don't fear. Even though we are helpless sinners, we know that Christ died for us. He has taken away the things that cause us the most suffering. And if he has control over our sins, he certainly has control over all things that cause us to suffer.

We may not sing "Alleluia" during Lent, but we still rejoice. How can we sing this at a time like this? The same reason we can rejoice in suffering. We rejoice in our suffering because of the suffering of Christ. He suffered for us sinners. He suffered for the hopeless. He suffered so that we might be reconciled to God. He suffered and died

so that we might live forever. We still sing, "thousand, thousand thanks shall be, dearest Jesus, unto thee." Amen.