

Rorate Coeli
22 December, Anno Domini 2019
Philippians 4:4-7
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Considering where he was sitting, St. Paul gives some rather strange advice - "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." These words from someone who most likely was sitting in prison, probably even expecting that he would soon be executed because of his faithful confession of Christ. It certainly didn't seem as though he had much to rejoice in. And yet, he had everything to rejoice in! He had been rescued from unbelief. He had received the forgiveness of all his sins through the Blood of God's Lamb. He had been promised the crown of everlasting life. And now, the former blasphemer and persecutor of Christ had been counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of His Lord who suffered death and judgment for him. He was blessed to share in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, suffering that stems from Satan's hatred of God. This isn't generic suffering. This isn't suffering because you didn't do well on a test or you came down with whatever virus du jour is going around. This isn't suffering brought on by the fact that you disobeyed God's Word and reached out for what is forbidden. Just the opposite. This is suffering that come BECAUSE you dare resist the flesh or confess the true faith. This suffering comes because your faith and your trust and your hope are in Jesus of Nazareth. These are holy sufferings that come upon you because Satan stirs up the world and your flesh to attack you in hopes that you will be so filled with despair that you forsake Christ in order to gain yourself temporary relief.

Why on earth is this something to rejoice in? Why should I rejoice when the desires of my flesh relentlessly assail me? Why should I rejoice when my own family turns against me and mocks me for the faith I confess? Why should we rejoice when the world's hatred of the Church seems to be gaining the upper hand and saying that I'm a Christian becomes a liability? What could there possibly be in any of that that should cause me to rejoice? Of course, we don't find pleasure in these things. By no means is the Holy Spirit demanding that you seek out these things or find them enjoyable. But, even in your sorrow and your trouble you can rejoice because the Lord Jesus Christ, bearing your flesh, has risen from the dead triumphant over all these things. In doing so, He has promised that none of these things will actually be able to harm you because you share His victory over them in Holy Baptism. None of these things negate or undo the promises of God. None of

these things testify to how God sees you. None of these things will triumph over you because Jesus has already triumphed over them. They will bite at you. They will yell at you. They will try to convince you of their power. But they are full of hot air. They are nothing except defeated.

Your name is written in the Book of Life just as surely as you bear the sign of cross given to you the day you were baptized. And on the last day, all the suffering that your enemies have caused will be ended and your faith in Jesus will be shown to be anything but wasted. Like Him, you will rise victorious to eternal life. And, what is more, your Lord, even in this life, will take this suffering and turn it to your good. He will help you and strengthen you through the very things that are meant to harm you as you remain in His Word. He will use what is meant to draw you away from Him to draw you closer to Him. As you cling to what your Savior has promised you, He will deepen in you the peace that passes all human understanding. The Holy Spirit will testify to you the faithfulness of God such that nothing in this world, no matter how dark or difficult or scary or big, will be able to take away the certain hope that you have of your final and eternal victory that Christ has already obtained for you.

By faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, all the baptized may be certain that their suffering is Christ's own suffering and that the resurrection that followed Christ's suffering is most certainly promised to them. Your suffering is not in vain. It may seem so but the Lord has promised that He will use even your afflictions to bless you and those around you. He will glorify His name in you as you bear these sufferings in faith, committing your cause and your life to His keeping, seeking no glory or benefit for yourself but rather glory for the One who has redeemed your life from eternal judgment when there was nothing you could do to save yourself. No matter how furiously he tries, Satan cannot take away from you a single thing that your Lord has promised you and won for you through His cross. You have nothing to fear and everything to rejoice in because the Lord is at hand. Precisely in those times when it seems He is furthest away, He is actually nearest to you, working all things to your good, even your death.

And not only are your sufferings for the Name of Christ something to rejoice in but through them, you are graciously invited to bear witness to Christ as you endure in faith, as even your tears, noticed by your Heavenly Father, are tempered by the assurance of those things that can't be seen, the eternal day when tears and sorrows will be taken away and never known again. What a high honor to be given the opportunity to proclaim the Name of Christ for the comfort and strength of your fellow laboring saints. And not only for our fellow Christians but also as an

invitation to those who still struggle without hope, who do not yet know the Christ who humbled Himself for our sake and subjected Himself to our corruption and death in order to set us free and promise us a glorious end to the heartache that now so often surrounds us.

The battle couldn't be any more fierce. But rejoice...always! Because the Lord loves you. The Lord is your shade and your keeper. He is your faithful Shepherd who has tasted sorrow and temptation in every way that you have and He will lead you on safe paths through death into eternal life where suffering will never be able to touch you again for all eternity.

In the Name of +Jesus.