

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. (Romans 5:1-5)

Rejoice!

Tomorrow, all over the country, even people who are not particularly religious will identify what they're thankful for. The idea is that recognizing our blessing will make us more joyful. Since the day after tomorrow is the unofficial start of the Christmas season, we're going to see that word "joy" a lot over the next month. I hope that as we go through this holiday season we'll find many reasons to rejoice in God's love. But do you think that this year there are some unique obstacles to rejoicing? What, with the crisis in the automotive industry threatening as many as three million jobs across the country and the world wide credit crisis driving our economy into a recession, does it seem hard to rejoice? Are we really afraid? Are afraid that we're going to lose our pension or our retirement benefits and be unable to enjoy those golden years we've been promised here in America? Are we afraid that we're going to lose our jobs and then lose our houses? Are we afraid that if we tried to sell out and move to somewhere less threatened that we wouldn't even get enough out of our houses to pay off what we still owe? All those things might make the calls to rejoice this holiday season ring a little hollow. But God does want us to rejoice. This evening we want to look for the reasons that Paul gives for Christians to rejoice. In the process, we hope to give ourselves something to be thankful for tonight and tomorrow. My friends, **Rejoice!**

I.

Rejoice because you stand in a state of grace! Paul says, "**We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.**" The glory of God means heaven. We Christians always have the promise of eternal life in front of us. We're justified by faith. We have peace with God. We have access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. Paul uses all these "church words" – words that we've repeated so many times that it's easy for us to forget what they mean. But these words sum up the joy that every Christian has.

We rejoice because we stand in God's grace. If I were to ask you to define grace tonight, every one of my confirmation students sitting out there would jump up and say, "God's undeserved love." I've told them many times that every Lutheran should know that definition. That definition is wonderful because it's short and easy to remember, and most of all, it's accurate. But what does it mean? Practically speaking, it means that God loved us so much that he found a way to erase our sin. He found a way to make peace with us. Our sin makes us God's enemy. Every human being is born an enemy of God. There's only one way that our war with God can end: we lose and go to hell. Grace is how God got you and me out of hell. It's how Jesus paid for every sin of every sinner who's ever lived.

Now, I know that I say this to you every week. And it may not sound all that interesting anymore, but it's still true: you and I are sinners, too. The power of sin is still in our hearts. You see it in the struggle we have with doubt and fear, especially at times like these. We only feel fear and doubt because we're sinners. If we had perfect faith, we would never worry about anything. We would never question God's love or doubt or wrestle with what he says in his word. Do you have that kind of faith? Well, how do you feel about the financial crisis gripping our country and hitting the Detroit area especially hard? How do you feel about the future of the auto industry and your real estate values? Does it scare you? Do you have to admit that your faith is imperfect?

Of course you do. You're a sinner. Even if the economic situation doesn't scare you, there is something in your life that does. It may be the choices your children are making. It may be your health. It may be any one of a hundred thousand other things. But fear and doubt challenge us all. God commands us to be perfect in our relationship with him, which means perfect in our confidence in him. The Bible always presents doubt as sin and the work of the devil. If we're honest, we have to admit that doubt is very much a part of our experience, even though we are Christians.

Why is that true for us believers? Because every one of us is really two people. We are a believer and an unbeliever, a sinner and a saint at the same time. In our heart, there's a believer who trusts in the promises of God. But there's also an unbeliever pulling him down, denying and questioning all that God says. He is as foul as the worst unbeliever in the world around us. That sinner corrupts all that we are. He is God's sworn enemy. He is the source of fear and doubt and he earns hell for us.

But we stand in a state of grace. God doesn't look at us as sinners and saints. He looks at us simply as saints. Today, God calls us perfect because Jesus trusted his Father perfectly for us and because Jesus died and paid for the doubts that rise in our hearts. Jesus went to the cross because you and I cannot kick that unbeliever out of our hearts. Jesus suffered all the hell and the death that we earn. Then he rose and God said that we are forgiven. God said that our debt is paid in full. When that happy day comes when your house is paid off and you can burn the mortgage, that house is yours. Until that day comes, you could always get into trouble with the bank and lose it. But once you have made the final payment, the bank can't come back and demand more money. You're free from them. My friends, you and I are free from hell, even though that sinner still lives inside us and still undermines our faith and still creates doubts and fear. Jesus paid for all he is and all he does. We will not suffer in hell. We are free.

II.

Faith is nothing more than trusting that promise of God. And by a miracle only God could work, the very promise that we're supposed to trust gives us that faith. God put his power into the announcement that he forgives us and loves us and takes care of us. That power gives birth to our faith. That power keeps our faith alive. That addresses the central issue of our lives as Christians in a sinful world: the weakness in our faith. If the devil himself appeared before a person with a perfect faith, that person would just shrug his shoulders and say, "So what? I have Jesus on my side." No doubt or fear would enter his heart. If we had a perfect faith, we would never sin. We would never lose our focus on what's important. We would never put our money or our jobs or our houses ahead of God. We would always rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

But our faith is not perfect. Doubt can torment us. Many times in my own life I've suffered fear and doubt. Many times as a pastor I've ministered to Christians tortured by anxiety. What is God's cure for that doubt and fear? The gospel. The message. When you struggle with doubt, you won't feel better if you do more. You won't feel better if you think harder and come up with better arguments. You will only feel better when God tells you that he loves you. You will only feel better when you realize that Jesus knew you two thousand years ago when he hung on the cross. He knew your name there and then and he did all that for you.

Everything God does in our lives, he does for the sake of our faith because faith in him gets us from this life to everlasting life. This life is all about getting faith in Jesus and keeping that faith alive until we reach heaven. God tells us something that you can only understand by faith: suffering is good for us because God uses suffering to purify our faith. Paul says, "**We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.**"

When God sends suffering, he's giving our faith a workout. I remember rushing once to the emergency room because a young woman from my congregation had just died. I got there and found her parents and siblings stunned. Tears were flowing. But the father said very quietly, but with enormous strength and certainty, "This isn't my daughter. This is just a shell." He knew that she had gone to heaven. This was a man who had faced a great deal of difficulty in his life. Many times, I sat down with him or his wife to talk about one tragedy or another. God used all that hurt to strengthen them. They had perseverance. No matter what the devil threw at them, their faith held. They had what Paul calls character. The Greek word really means the ability to pass the tests of life. They were able to lose their daughter and not waver in their trust in God.

They had hope. Not the wavering, maybe-things-will-get-better kind of longing we sometimes mean when we say "hope." Your car breaks down and your cell phone can't get a signal. You hope that a police car comes by and calls a tow truck. But you don't know if it will happen. That's not what Paul means when he says, "**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.**" Christian hope is confidence. It's the expectation that God is going to keep his promises. It's not, "I hope God hears me." It's, "I know God hears me and I trust that he is going to make things better, if not in this life, then in the life to come."

That is the key. God strengthens our faith because this life is just the preparation for the life to come. A woman in a Bible class once asked her pastor, "If God uses suffering to strengthen our faith, wouldn't we be

better off with a weaker faith?" The answer was no. Because God uses that faith to bless us, over and over again. A person who suffers, but who has a firm trust in the Lord, is far better off because we do have to live in a world where sin and the power of the devil are real. That person can rejoice even when hardship comes. He knows that God is with him, even when life hurts. He isn't an infant in his faith anymore. He is mature. He has strength and contentment and he can serve God here knowing that eternal life is coming.

How do we get that strong and mature faith? Paul said that he pours his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. He's talking about the gospel. The Holy Spirit comes to us every time we hear about our Savior, who loves us, who died and rose for us, who takes care of us every day here, who even sends us suffering when he knows that's what we need today. That's why we keep gathering here, Sunday after Sunday, and holiday after holiday. We come to hear about Jesus. We come to recharge our faith. Because God is doing all things for our good, even in hardship, we can rejoice. My friends, even if you are facing difficulties in these uncertain times, **rejoice because God uses sufferings for our benefit.**

What are you thankful for? There are so many blessings we can point to. Family. Church. Freedom. Physical blessings. But don't forget to thank God that he loves you enough to carefully decide what sufferings to send you and which ones to hold back. Don't forget to thank God that he won't allow you to become a worshipper of the false gods of money or property or standard of living. Don't forget to thank God that he puts your eternal life first and he uses every day here to draw you there. Because when you reach eternal life, you will be free from all doubt and fear, free from all hardship and suffering, free from all sin and from death and from the power of the devil. You will live in perfect faith and perfect joy and perfect love for all eternity. Amen.