

The Praying Church

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John 16:23–30 (31–33)

Greeting

My dear brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, the peace of the Lord Jesus be with all of you.

Joy and Tribulation: A Contradiction?

What Jesus says about joy in this gospel reading for us today, and its connection with tribulation, is enough to blow our minds. For it seems to us to be an obvious contradiction. Tribulation, trouble, pain in the body and mind, a bad conscience, a dull life, anger, quarrelsomeness, pitying ourselves because we're not getting our rights. These things we know, and they seem to our minds to be the opposite of joy.

When the devil taught Adam and Eve, "You will know good and evil," We think these things are evil, and flee from them to something that's fun and exciting, that pleases you and is good. We know that in our bones. That's the theology of ourselves.

And then Jesus says, "Joy, joy!" It must surely mean the absence of our trouble, the floating away of our tribulation. Everything will be hunky-dory just as we dream.

Israel and the Golden Calf

So today we are going to have a headache from this contradiction because we see a very clear reflection of ourselves in Israel, that's why you must learn to know the Old Testament. God tells you about your life, Israel's history, in your spiritual biography. They were impatient, running after other gods, when their troubles seemed to be unendurable: "Ah, we don't know what happened to this Moses. Forty days now he's been gone, and it seems so dull."

I mean, the people around us know something about reproduction and copulation and drunkenness and dancing. The Baal worship is everywhere. It's in our time, everywhere. And so we're not going to be robbed of those pleasures when they made other gods.

Jesus, the Perfect Israelite

It was not so with that one perfect Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the perfect Israel. He is your perfect righteousness in the world. He says you will have tribulation, and he is the one who experienced it to the utmost and for you.

And He says, "Be of good cheer, be full of joy. I have overcome the world. You have a victory in Me that not even sin or death, devil or hell or world can overcome. I am the victor." But He is the victor by such great tribulation.

Moses Pleads with God

God's wrath burned hot against Israel. "I'm going to wipe them out. They're not even My people anymore. They're yours, Moses. What I'll do with you, Moses, is I'll start over so that we have a good group." Moses said no.

"God, why are You so full of wrath against Your people? Your reputation will suffer if You destroy it, and the Egyptians will say, 'He's a deceitful God, He speaks with a forked tongue. You thought you were being delivered, but you were being brought out to be slaughtered in the mountains.'" So Moses pleaded with God. "Remember who You are. You are God. Remember what You promised. Remember Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; You said, 'I will bless you. I will give you descendants, and in your descendant, all the nations of the earth will bless themselves.'"

Jesus, the Root of Our Joy

So that is the true Jew, Jesus, the descendants of Abraham, and He is the root of our joy. Joy is like a fountain; it bubbles and makes everything wet around. For Jesus is God saying yes to the promises to bless you. God saying amen to the prayers of Jesus and to God's promise about you. And so they are filled full in this one Israelite. In that day, in that day, that is the day when this Israelite did what Israel is for. He suffered the tribulation. He did the Father's will.

For the mystery of the love of God is that He rescues us corrupted people from corruption by suffering the corruption in Himself. I cannot imagine this. We have a little bit of it in a marriage or in a family where the wickedness or the harshness or the ego of the other one is undone by the suffering of the one who has been offended. But defeated on such a deep and broad scale, for all of our insults, all of our lusting after the God that will give us fun and take

away all the tribulation and trouble, all of that is what is poured on this innocent Jew, and in that Jew, God blesses the whole of mankind, particularly He blesses you, and this is what the Father wants.

He is the one. Jesus is the one whom the Father sent into the world with blessings so large you cannot comprehend it. It will take you and me all of eternity in the bliss of heaven to begin to understand the size of that love and blessing.

It is a joy so rich that it almost splits our seams. It fills the life of the church full, and it overflows like sunshine goes around, like water makes things wet, so that in our homes and in our schools and work we are creatures of joy. That's what Jesus said, not the absence of tribulation, but the fullness of joy. And this is a victory so complete that this man who had suffered unspeakable wrath and tribulation—The condemnation of us all is borne by this one Son of God and Son of Man, that not even death can touch it. He has killed death and hell. He went to hell, the conqueror, and blew open its gates. And the devil, his works are destroyed. "Do not be afraid. I have overcome the world."

Tribulation from Our Own Sin

But the tribulation that he overcomes is also our sin. Much of your tribulation and mine is because of our own sin. We want to trust God and promptly worry. We want to love God and promptly are bloated with self-love. We want to serve God and immediately we are afraid we're going to lose something. We want to praise God and we're afraid somebody will mock us, and we want to be God's people, and we keep falling, falling into old habits, old patterns, and old troubles. So the joy of God is this: that He makes right who you are.

Everything that is wrong with us before God is made right. Jesus is that right. Jesus crucified, buried, is that day. Jesus is God making you right.

Everything that is right about what God thinks is given to you in Jesus. Jesus is what God thinks about you. He is at work buying you back into the favor of God, not because you deserve it, but that is the way God is. This God is different from other gods. Heaven cannot contain the joy of Christ, of the holy angels of God the Father, for Jesus alone is the one who is able to do this.

Scattered, Yet Not Alone

“You will all be scattered,” and we know what that lonesomeness is. It’s troublesome, vexatious, and especially when we are scattered, when spouse and spouse are scattered when parents and children are scattered, and then when we get scattered from each other, what a vexation it is!

Well, He alone, and yet He is not alone, because in that man alone is where God the Father makes everything right. Nobody else can go to the cross for him, or to the grave, or to hell, or to the resurrection, by that tribulation he won the victory. So that you, even when you are alone and in tribulation, do not have to be a creature of grumbling and complaining, of self-pity and self-love. You dare to be creatures of joy, and so God loves those who cling to His Son. “I do not say that I’ll have to ask the Father to give you something, for the Father loved you because you have believed Me, and you have loved Me.” That is the name of Jesus. That in that man God willed to suffer the rejection and the tribulation, the insults and the condemnation, the greed and selfishness of it all, and out of that, Jesus, in his weakness and suffering, made victory. He is alive, never to die again.

Praying in the Name of Jesus

That is to pray in the name of Jesus. It’s not some little magic one-armed bandit that you pull in the name of Jesus. Then you hope to get all your cherries lined up in a row so you get the jackpot. Don’t turn it into a magic formula. It is a way of life.

No Escape from Tribulation; Satan the Accuser

There is no escape for you and me from tribulation in the world. God be praised. There is no escape because we are attached to Christ. We are not just wandering round. We who have been scattered have been gathered into holy church.

The world despises that God and hates that God and ridicules those who live in joy—that is, who live in faith—and if the world is not enough tribulation, there is the interior tribulation of your own quarrel, the effects of the rebellion against God and the mistrust, the anxiety of our own unfaith, the cursing of our faith and fortune, our sins before God’s eyes are clear, and we are troubled by God’s wrath, with these Satan is busy to accuse you. “You have no right to joy.” “Why should I be joyful? What is there to be joyful about? If you had the pain or the trouble that I have, you wouldn’t be joyful either.”

Satan is always there. He is a lying preacher, and he's a better preacher even than I am. He will always accuse you and make you doubt and wonder whether God has any pleasure in you at all. That's all he wants—just to rob you of that joy of God liking you because of Christ's work and you clinging to Christ alone.

Joy Begins with God

Joy begins with God, for it is in that day, the day of Jesus carrying our sin and wrath to death, the day that Jesus went into the teeth of hell and broke it open, broke its jaw, and broke the grave open, and gives life to you. So joy begins with God. God making you a pleasure to His eyes as you are dressed in Jesus. In that day, He says, "You will pray the Father, and He will give it to you in My name. Pray that your joy may be full."

Tribulation Spurs Us to Prayer

So there is a strange connection between tribulation and joy, and it is the connection of prayer. For tribulation is upon those who haven't figured out how to make their own gods, to belly up to [unclear] bull calf, and to drink and to eat and be merry and do what you want. Their joy is that one man.

So joy begins with God, and the tribulation is a stimulus. It is a spur to go to a life of prayer. Prayer begins with God. It is God giving you the promise of Jesus, and you say Amen to that promise. It is God telling you He takes care of you, and you say, "Please take care of me."

Prayer is that conversation with God. So first of all, don't open your mouth and start blabbering. Open your ears and start listening to what He says. When He says this is how you pray, pray "Our Father," well, then think and pray "Our Father." That's what he told you to pray.

Prayer is that conversation, and it is a conversation that urges God by your name: "God, by Your being, by Your reputation, don't destroy the people. Everybody will get a bad idea about Your name." That is urging God. What Paul calls supplication.

So the Son, by His suffering, glorifies the Father in His work, and the Father glorifies His Son Jesus, and the Father gives glory to all of those who call upon God in Jesus: "I will honor you." God says in Psalm 91, "I will deliver you. I will listen to you." God saying to you, "I will honor you because you call on Me."

So there's a connection between joy and praise, joy and tribulation. Tribulation urges the believers, you and me, to prayer. And therefore, Jesus says, "Pray that your joy may be full." I wonder why it is that the church in cities are being either glum and sad, muttering as if it were muttering in its own beard, or else so frivolously trying to find things of excitement and happiness and pleasure, as if that were joy, joy flowed from the tribulation. And tribulation sees joy.

First: Pray for All People and for Those in Authority

So there are three factors in today's service that underscore this close connection between prayer, tribulation, and the life of joy. The first one is Saint Paul's exhortation to be busy at prayer, to be supplicating God, urging God: "You promised it, God, You said so," like a little child pulling on his mother's skirt. "Yes, Mama, but you promised me." Well, how can a mother fight against that?

How can God fight against this when you stick His own promises in His ears and say, "Now do it for me"? See, "Our Father" is nothing but one long [unclear] of such a prayer.

Hallow Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done. Give us our bread. Forgive us our sins. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil.

It's one long cry for God to do exactly what He has done and what He promises to do.

So the prayer is to be made especially for all people and for the king. It is to be made for all people and especially for those who are in authority.

Can you imagine where we are undergoing more vexation than we are in the places of authority? Can you imagine for just a moment how are the husbands exercising authority with their wives? Abandonment and bullying. How are the parents exercising authority with their children? TVs, babysitters, daycare centers, pay somebody else to raise them. Don't bother. How are the authorities going in the church? Presidents, leaders, oppressing pastors and congregations, trying to get some something out of the church, trying to tease her into a program to do something.

And what about the government? Do you see what kind of vexations we have? What about the people who run the government? Our children or people in need are neglected or abused or used, how children bring grief and sorrow to their mothers and fathers, and then in the schools, what kinds of new problems vex them? Authority in the school are they consistent in

teaching? Every time there's a strike, you hear so much about "We want fewer students and more time with these students." But the fight always comes over money. Chicago has over 700 highly paid executives, 80 to 120,000 a year, who never touch a student or a classroom. They could be gone, and nobody would notice it except the [unclear].

And in the government, national government, law is used as if it were all right to destroy a child in the body, as if it were all right for male to marry male and female to marry female. Vexation. What of the 1.3 million children killed every year, and the grief, and the distortion, and the deceit in the women who have to face this? So, if you want to hear Paul at the time of tribulation, and you want joy, then you are to be praying for these people. You who love the Father in heaven, those who cling to His Son, the one whom He sent, you are the people who are to be prayed.

The Prayers of the Saints: Thunder and Lightning

Zechariah says, "Pour out on us the spirit of grace and supplication." And in just two weeks from today, we will celebrate Pentecost. Already, we are beginning to pray for that spirit. The Book of Revelation, chapter eight. There is the Lamb opening the book in that day.

Now, the will of God is clear in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. And then there is silence in heaven for a half hour. Then the angel comes with the great censer, fills it with incense, and puts it before the altar. These are the prayers of the saints. And then that startling thing: the angel takes this big incense pot and hurls it to the earth, and it makes thunder and lightning. That's what your prayers are—the thunder and lightning of God on the world.

Now maybe we say, "Well, we can't hear that." Well, ask Sidney about whether the prayers are [unclear]. Ask the others in the congregation for whom we pray. Ask those people who run the government.

You've heard me talk about Mayor Washington being elected in Chicago. Chatham prayed for that, and he confounded all of the political pundits, so you are to be in prayer, Rogate Sunday, pray, and particularly for those in authority, for God wants all people to be saved, and we are to pray for a quiet life where we may be godly and [unclear].

Second: Mother's Day and Mother Church

Secondly, what better than Mother's Day to learn to honor our mothers and especially Mother Church, mother of us all? We bless our mothers, and that is proper. We, for the sake of Mother Church, we pray for the peace that makes life possible in family and in the distressed world. It isn't much help to buy Mama a flower today and take her to a lunch and be a snarling, rebellious brat for the rest of the time, quarrelsome and quarreling with each other and making life miserable.

But so is the life of Mother. She is blessed, and she is marked with the pain from the time she conceived to the labor pain through her old age, where she still lives as mother. There's a river of tears that flow for mothers from mothers. They weep for children brutally mistreated, mistreated in conflict. People love to make wars. They take our sons and daughters for wars that we did not ask for, do not want, and they shove them into the mouth of the cannon.

On this Mother's Day, particularly we of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod remember the armed forces and the men and women who care for those in service. Mother's Day. Some of our own sons are in places of great danger. Janice, one boy, she has three in the military. One of them is in peace. What is the meaning of Bosnia? Thank you.

Other tears flow for children who become wild and hostile. They are quarrelsome, fighting, rebellious, troubled with the law. They are lazy and brutish in their conduct, always in trouble, and the mothers weep.

So I say to you, there is a close connection between the life of joy, the life of prayer, and tribulation. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. That's what God says, and we have to learn how to think that way. So I say to you, Mother Zion, water your prayers with your tears, for those who sow in tears shall reap in joy; they will bring their harvest fruits with them.

Third: Blessing the Seed and the Soil

The third theme today is: we bless the seed and the soil. We pray for those who plant and those who eat the fruits of their labor. We call upon God to give us good weather, good workers, and a thankful, generous people. Will God say [unclear] you pray?

Too Busy, Too Bored to Pray

If we may be too busy to pray, then we are too busy, busy like Israel, making homemade gods to save us. In fact, we must spend all our time saving the gods we have made, for they will abandon. But some may not be too bitter.

There are some who are bored, indifferent, too cold to pray, and they do not like the weakness of waiting on God. “We don’t know what happened to Moses.” We know. And so they made their own God. They’re bitter. They suck on it. They’re angry or sorrow, or they’re dumb. That’s all they can pray about. That’s what they talk about and live.

Israel made gods, or they were bored with the 10 Commandments and with waiting for Moses, and blasphemously they ascribe deliverance to the gods they made and worship them with God’s name. Such blindness is the root of all boredom and indifference about praise.

Joy Takes Practice

Joy takes practice, for faith receives the Son whom the Father gives in His love, and clings and looks to that Son alone. He is alone, the way of mercy and joy, of peace and hope. Joy takes practice, and what it takes practice in is practice listening to what God says, so that our faith may be nurtured, and exercising it in prayer, that joy may be full.

God has planted you into a bored, vile, weary world, and that tribulation and vexation does not leave you alone, but He planted you there as recipients of joy, as fountains of joy. The tribulation and the joy are connected to the life of prayer. Dear people, if we can’t be anything else, let us at least ask God. Make us the praying church.

The peace of the Lord Jesus be with all of you.

SOURCE

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