

Jesus compares the sorrows of his church to the sorrows of a woman in labor. Her sorrow is turned into joy. A child has been born to her. While she's exhausted and still feeling aches and pains, she holds in her arms the very source of her joy. While she wants everyone to go away, she wants the baby to sleep, she doesn't want to get woken up every few hours by a nurse, her baby is there, and her sorrows are overwhelmed by the joy of a little person whom God has brought into the world.

The church has joy. To us a Child is born and a Son is given. Christ himself is our everlasting joy. So while the church has sorrow in this earthly life, her joy remains. He who shed his blood for her, made her clean by the washing of water with the Word, who feeds her with his body and blood, who constantly bestows God's favor, pardon, and eternal life upon her – he stands risen from the dead never to die again. He is the joy of all her desires no matter how much she must suffer and grieve.

To have such joy in the midst of sorrows is what it means to be free. It's like walking through a prison and walking right out. You can bear whatever cross God places upon you, knowing that you are not shackled to it. You are not a slave to sin. You can face the hostility of those who hate God's church without returning insult for insult, because no matter how much this world makes you grieve and lament, nothing can take away the joy of having Christ as your Savior.

St. Peter talks about such freedom. Act as free men, he says, but don't use your freedom as an excuse to do wrong. You are not slaves of sin and condemnation, but of God. And if you are his slave, then you are free. Because he doesn't rule you with threats and coercion, but with his grace and favor in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, God's kingdom consists of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). To have this joy, which only Christ can give, is to be free.

Jesus taught his disciples about this joy right before he was arrested, condemned, and crucified. "A little while," he said, "and you will not see me anymore; and again a little while and you will see me." He would be taken from them, tortured, mocked, pierced, and executed. In sorrow they would be scattered to their own homes. But on the third day he would rise from the dead, and he would appear to them again. Their sorrow was turned to joy when they saw him. His words were fulfilled.

And this second "little while" would last forty days before our Lord was received again into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. There he is hidden from our eyes. But we hold on to our Lord's words, "A little while." The sorrow we endure in this world is only for a little while. St. Paul calls it the light trouble of this moment (2 Cor 4:17). It serves to prepare us for the everlasting weight of glory, which no one can imagine in this life. Because while we live in this present "little while," we don't look to what our eyes can see, the pleasures of life which come and go, but to the joy our Lord has secured by his blood and preserves in heaven for us. His Word, which is God's power, the good news of salvation, is what guards us until we reach the goal of our faith, the salvation ready to be revealed on the last day (1 Pet 1:5).

Jesus told his disciples, "I tell you the truth, you will cry and mourn, but the world will be glad." Here our Lord teaches us what kind of joy we have by describing what kind of sorrow we have in this life. The things that make us sad don't make the world sad. Of course, the world mourns over all sorts of things. And when we look at the outside of it all, it appears that we mourn over the same things. A baby dies after only a week of living. The mother is devastated, and all who hear about it can't help but feel terrible for her. A war breaks out. Hundreds and thousands of people are either killed, injured, or displaced from their homes. Even those who observe it from afar will feel some level of sadness. The

common ailments, which affect all people, make all people sad. But Jesus is getting to the very heart of the matter. What makes a Christian sad isn't sickness, disease, destruction, and death as such. These are only the outward side-effects of a much deeper problem. Christians recognize the wicked, unspeakable evil of their natural desires warring against the soul. This is the source of all sorrow. It is what comes out of the heart, the lack of fear, love, and trust in God, which we all inherited from our first parents.

Christians also observe the false teachings of this godless world. Such teachings attack our Lord's works, and the aftermath of all the world's problems only bring this sad reality to light. For example, we mourn over the millions of babies who have been murdered in the womb. Now, we do have reason to be cautiously optimistic. This past week we heard about the likely overturning of Roe v Wade, the wicked act of injustice requiring all states to legalize the murder of the unborn. It appears that the day is finally coming when at least those states with just rulers will be able to curb and punish this heinous crime against infants. Yet, we see people protesting and trying to intimidate judges with their godless politicking, insisting that killing a child in the womb is a constitutional right. This makes us mourn. Yet, it doesn't make us mourn simply because they are advocating for the murder of the innocent. It goes even deeper than that. They are worshipping demons, likely the same ones which moved the ancient Canaanites to sacrifice their own children to the idol Moloch. Even many people of Israel fell into this error. They are attacking God for creating man, both male and female, in his own image. This is what makes us mourn. All the perversions, which are subtly and all the more blatantly promoted in our schools, media, and government, are of course bad for culture, and they inevitably bring about a weak and crumbling civilization. This, by itself, is enough to make any reasonable unbeliever mourn. But as Christians, we mourn because the Word is being attacked. The world rejoices in some hope for earthly unity and stability, but we have no such hope in this dying world. We have no such joy.

This world only knows how to rejoice in temporary things. It sets up heroes on both the left and the right hand. But whether such heroes give glory to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ doesn't matter to them. A school, which once was devoted to teaching the gospel of our Savior and grounding students in a life of holiness by the Word of God, has either been watered down or has completely abandoned this mission altogether. But as long as it provides career opportunities for making money and fulfilling our dreams, the world rejoices in this. While the faithful mourn over the neglect of our Lord's name, the world boasts in man's ability to make a name for himself.

This is what we sorrow over. We sorrow over the attacks against our Lord's works and Word, the attacks, which come from the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. But such sorrow must be turned into joy. Because Christ, who is our joy, our hope, our peace, our gracious head, our everlasting righteousness, our all in all – he who willingly bore the attacks of the devil, endured the denial of this world, and carried our sins upon himself – is now risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity.

We therefore live in this joy, even in the midst of sorrows. This is why Peter can tell us to be subject to all human institutions, giving honor to all men in whatever authority God has given them. This is coming from Peter who was put to death under Emperor Nero. We don't rebel against the government. We pay whatever honor or revenue is due. And those who do evil should fear them, because God has placed them there to punish wickedness and reward good. But we don't need to fear them. Because our joy is not grounded in how good our rulers are. Our joy isn't in how good the world is. It is grounded in Christ whose blood has wiped away our sins and whose life frees us from the wrath of God.

We therefore fear God, not men. And our love is shared by our fellow Christians who find their joy in the same thing.

So walk in this joy! Depend on it! Especially when you must suffer pains of body, mind, and conscience, when you must resist the temptations battling against your soul, when you are struck to the heart with unspeakable grief, you can honestly sing, “Ever glad at heart I am.” Because your joy is true. It is established. It is finished. It is secured in the exalted Lord Jesus, the God of our salvation. As surely as no one can knock him off his heavenly throne, no one can take this joy away from you. You can walk and not faint, run and not get weary, all because of these sweet words of Jesus, “A little while.” Your afflictions are light and for a moment. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning where his mercies are always new, strengthening you, comforting you, and cheering you with the joy of what is before you. God will delight in his church. No more will anyone hear in her a sound of weeping or a cry. No more will a child live only a few days. Your labors and tears will not be in vain. Because God has become flesh. The Child born into this world, the Son given up for our sins, sits enthroned forever, never to die again. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.*