

Jesus compares the sorrows of the church on earth with the sorrows of childbirth. The church is our mother. St. Paul says that our mother is free. She is the heavenly Jerusalem. The Scriptures call the church our mother, because it is in the church where we are born again through baptism, nurtured with the spiritual milk of God's Word, and grow into mature manhood through the doctrine and confession of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church is free. Her joy is in the Lord Jesus Christ, her heavenly Bridegroom who gave his life into death for her and cleansed her of every filthy stain of sin. He covers up all her shame by his own righteousness. All those who are members of the church have the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. Yet, as long as we live in this world of sorrow, the church on earth experiences labor pain.

Now, if we are going to call the church our mother, then we need to understand what makes her the church. She isn't the church because of any human organization. Of course, she makes use of human organizations, just like your earthly mother makes use of these things. Your earthly mother made sure there was a roof over your head. She made sure you had a bedtime and that you had transportation to school and other important events. But what made your mother your mother was not what kind of kitchen she had, what kind of car she drove, or how much money she saved up. What made her your mother was that she gave birth to you. You received life from her life.

So how is the church our mother? It isn't that she provides you with a church building or various boards and organizations to take care of earthly needs, as important as these things are. The church is your mother, because she has the Word of God. It was by the Word of God that you were born again to a living hope. It is by the Word of God that you have the saving blood of Christ and the power of his resurrection. The Word of God is the power of the Holy Spirit by whom you have faith in God the Father through your Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Word of God that makes the church what she is. Wherever the gospel calls and gathers Christ's sheep, and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ's command, there is the church. There God's children are being nurtured in the arms of their mother.

This is why our mother is free. Though she makes use of earthly tools and organization, she is not bound to these things. She doesn't depend on these things. She isn't in debt to anything of this world. She rests in the Word of her Savior by which her children are fed with the gift of salvation and kept safe in the care of their heavenly Father. She has a joy that surpasses all earthly joys.

And yet, the world cannot recognize this joy. As long as the church exists on earth, she experiences sorrow. Jesus explained this to his disciples right before his arrest, suffering, and crucifixion. For a little while they would not see their Lord. He would be taken away

from them. The children of this world would mock and rejoice over the death of God's Son while the children of God would mourn. They would mourn, not just because their dear Lord was taken away by evil men. But they would see that same evil in their own hearts. The disciples all ran away when Jesus was arrested. This little while seemed like a lifetime of sorrow. But Jesus assured them that they would see him again, and their sorrow would be turned to joy. He would rise on the third day and appear to them, restoring to them the joy of salvation.

And yet, this joy is still not recognized by this world. It's still clouded by the sin and guilt of our own flesh. Even after Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples struggled with the lingering sorrow of Christ's crucifixion. John records for us the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples. It was when they were going fishing, and he caused them to catch a massive amount of fish. Then, as they were eating breakfast with him, Jesus asked Simon Peter three times if he loved him. Peter was still sad, reminded of the three times he denied his Lord. His shame was still lingering, which shook his confidence and kept him from expressing his full love for his Savior.

So it is with the children of the church on earth. Their joy is hidden in this life. Sometimes it shines through with great affection. But other times it is irked by the unbelief of the sinful flesh and the mocking on this world.

I mentioned in a previous sermon that, whenever I ask my three-year-old son what the First Commandment is, he says, "Honor your father and your mother." Of course, this isn't the First Commandment. It isn't part of the first table of the law, which tells us to love God above all things. But it is the first and greatest commandment in the second table of the law, which says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you don't honor your mother and your father, then you will not be able to honor God. We live in a time, which St. Paul warned us about, when people do not honor their father and their mother. Motherhood especially is despised as less valuable than a host of other worldly accomplishments. Fornication and cohabitation confuse the children who need stable examples and guides. The world rejoices over their sexual autonomy, thinking they have accomplished some ideal equality when they blur the lines between men and women, husbands and wives, and fathers and mothers. The result of this so-called progress isn't joy. Any Christian can see how this damages the duty of a mother and the unique role she has to care for her children in the fear of God.

But this is not the only reason the church on earth experiences sorrow. It isn't just because she lives in a world that despises godly motherhood. No, the church on earth experiences sorrow, because her members still notice the blemishes of sin in their own flesh. Simon Peter was sad when the risen Christ asked him if he loved him. Any Christian who is honest

about his own sinful nature can understand Peter's sorrow. Have you faithfully confessed Christ and his Word in this world of mocking and unbelief? Have you squandered your opportunities to love your fellow Christians? Have you honored Christ as he deserves to be honored? If you are honest, then you know what the answer is. This is at the heart of our sorrow as we live in this sinful world.

Jesus freely forgave Peter and the other disciples. And as surely as you hear the words of your risen Savior today, he freely forgives you as well. But it took a while for Peter and the disciples to heal from their fall. It took a while for them to recognize the full joy of Christ's resurrection. A woman who gives birth takes a while to heal from the tearing and stretching she endured during the labor. But, as Christ says, the joy of the birth of a child outweighs her sorrow. She forgets about her sorrow. That's not to say she doesn't still feel it. But the joy that a human being has come into the world is objectively much greater than anything she can feel.

Your failure to honor Christ and his Word is your failure to honor the church and her nurturing doctrine. But consider what it means to honor Christ. What is his greatest honor? Is it that you finally get over your sorrow and learn to rejoice? Certainly, he is honored by this. But even this isn't his greatest honor. The highest honor and worship of Christ is to believe what he says. He calls himself your joy, because he is your Savior from sin. He says that he has washed you clean. He says that he has taken away your sin. He says that he gives you eternal life. If you want to honor him, then believe what he says. Even though you still feel the sorrow of sin and doubt in your dying flesh, rest in what Jesus says. Even though you still notice the filth of your evil thoughts and feelings, rest in what Jesus says. Even though death surrounds you, let his words stand, because he has the words of eternal life.

And whatever sorrows you still experience because of sin and this evil world, Jesus says that they last just a little while. They may seem like they last a lifetime. But God's Word calls them light and momentary. They cannot be compared to the hope of glory, which Christ has prepared for you. Though your sinful passions continue to wage war against your soul, the righteousness of Christ retains the victory.

The joy of Christ's resurrection is objective. That means that it is true in and of itself. It doesn't depend on anything in you. It doesn't depend on how much you experience it or even on how much you believe it. The joy of Christ's resurrection is so true and certain that even the smallest mustard seed of faith stands secure in it. It is joy and peace, which surpasses all understanding. No one can take this joy away. That's what Jesus says. So take him at his Word. Hold onto his Word. Pray to your Father in heaven with the confidence that he hears you, because this is what your Lord Jesus says.

The church on earth experiences sorrow. False teachings, scandals, doubts, and all sorts of sin and evil are always trying to turn her children away. But her joy is in her husband who laid his life down for her. She therefore remains free. And if you are nurtured by the Word of God, then you remain free as well. Christ's birth, suffering, death, and resurrection remain the source of your joy. Perhaps you have lost your mother in this life. Maybe you never knew your mother. The pain caused by sin often runs very deep. But such pain and sorrow are only for a little while. Soon we will see our Savior face to face. Soon the church of God will fully experience the freedom and joy of Christ's resurrection. In the meantime, even as we still feel the chains of sin, we remain free. Even as we wait for him, Christ remains risen from the dead, and our joy remains complete in him. To him be all honor, praise, and dominion forever and ever. Amen.