

The Church Rejoices.

Text: Isa 66:10, Psa 122:1

Suggested Hymns:

507, 243, 161, 210, 793

1) Because We Are God's Children by Adoption

2) Because God Provides For The Church's Need

3) Because The Lord Assures The Church's Triumph

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is based on the Introit for today, Isaiah 66:10 and Psalm 122:1, ¹⁰ *“Rejoice with Jerusalem, And be glad with her, all you who love her; Rejoice for joy with her, all you who mourn for her; ...¹ I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go into the house of the LORD.”* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Latin word for today is *Laetare* which means rejoice.

The Lenten season is devoted to a consideration of the suffering and death of Christ and of its meaning for us all. The Introits for all the Sundays in Lent speak either of Christ's suffering, or of the suffering of the Christians and their deliverance from the various evils and enemies which threaten to overwhelm them.

But there is one exception to this rule. It is the Introit for today, the Fourth Sunday in Lent. As if to relieve the almost monotonous theme of suffering, this Introit introduces the note of rejoicing.

Those who are tempted to mourn for the church when they see the suffering of its Lord, and often of its members, are admonished to rejoice and to be glad. This rejoicing is said to occur in the fellowship of the church.

Hence let us consider this subject on the basis of this text, and under the gracious guidance of God's Holy Spirit: *The Church Rejoices*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. We Rejoice Because We Are God's Children by Adoption

There are few Scriptural terms which are so frequently and regularly misunderstood as the term “children of God.” When you mention the phrase to the average churchgoing person today, he may say, “Yes, we are all children of God. I believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man which Jesus taught.”

To all such people it comes as a shock to be told that Jesus never taught the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man in that sense. Jesus never said that all people were children of God and that therefore all had a right to call Him Father.

In fact, at times He said the very opposite. To the Jews He made this statement in John 8:42 and 44, “*If God were your Father, you would love Me, ...*”⁴⁴ *You are of your father the devil.* While the idea of the brotherhood of man is suggested many times on the pages of the New Testament, you will find that invariably it refers to the brotherhood which exists in the fellowship of Christian faith.

Not Children of God by Birth

By nature no person is a child of God in the New Testament sense. Paul says in Ephesians 2:3 that we *were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.* Nobody is born into God’s family or household.

Who, then, are children of God, and how does one get to be a child of God? Paul tells us this, too, when he says, “*you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*”¹ While no one is ever born into God’s family, we can be adopted into His family; in fact, this is the only way anyone can ever become a child of God. St. Paul also tells us this in Galatians 4:4-5, “*But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,*”⁵ *to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*

Children of God by Adoption

In other words, everyone who believes that his sin has put him outside of the family of God, but that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, came into the world to remove the guilt and punishment of sin, and who has been persuaded by God’s Holy Spirit to believe all this about Jesus Christ and to accept Him as his personal

Saviour, he has been adopted into God's family and is to be regarded as a child of God, both by his fellow Christians and by the Lord Himself.

It is the specific work of the Holy Spirit to make us children of God, to bring us into the family of God. We read in Romans 8:14, ¹⁴ *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.* There are exactly as many children of God in the world as there are true Christians in the world, no more and no fewer.

Reason for Joy

This is something not only well to remember, but over which to rejoice. We as members of the holy Christian church on earth are to rejoice because we are God's children by adoption. By the grace of God we belong to the select few.

Not all are children of God, not even most people are children of God. No, a minority are children of God. And God has made it possible that you and I belong to that privileged minority! Shall we not give thanks for this? ***Rejoice with Jerusalem, And be glad with her, all you who love her.*** Oh, that we would appreciate in a greater measure all that God has so wonderfully done for us!

To be a child of God is a unique privilege, an unusual blessing! Without our good and gracious God taking a mighty hand in the matter we would still be on the outside, children of the devil. But thanks be to God, the Lord has had mercy on us, provided the perfect salvation for us in and through His Son and has also seen to it that when this year came into being, arrangements had been made beforehand that we might hear the Gospel, to be strengthened in our faith, or brought to faith, as the case may be.

Is this not more than ample reason to rejoice with Jerusalem, the special name given to the church in our text, and to be glad with her? Yes, we have every reason to rejoice and to love the church!

Joy Banishes Fear

Is there, then, any reason why we as children of the most high God should ever be afraid, afraid of the future, afraid of sickness, afraid of death? Remember, "This is our Father's world." "He has the whole wide world in His hands." He rules over all, and all things are His; and we are His dear children.

He will always send His holy angels to watch over us and protect us so that no real harm can come near us. We can never thank God enough for having

made us His children. Just look at us, every one of us! Here we were, poor, sinful, wicked, rebellious sons and daughters, excluded from the household of our Creator, wretched and miserable, and yet because the Lord Jesus loved us unto death and the Holy Spirit went out after us and brought us back to God, we today are the children of God, walking together on the pathway that leads to our eternal home, our Father's house above. Surely this is cause for everlasting joy in our heart!

2. We Rejoice Because God Provides For The Church's Need

Our text continues, *Rejoice for joy with her, all you who mourn for her.* We often mourn for the church and pity her, and during Lent our observance sometimes threatens to become a mourning for the church's Head.

We hear of the agonising suffering of our Lord and Saviour and of the cruel death on the cross, and we begin to wish that God had saved the world some other way. We are filled with sympathy and pity for the suffering Son of God.

Rejoice with the Suffering Christ

Such mistaken sympathy and pity for Jesus can happen only when we do not fully realise how necessary Christ's substitutionary suffering was, or when we fail to realise how completely lost we were, or when we do not understand how great God's sacrifice had to be in order to accomplish such a tremendous blessing.

By nature we cannot comprehend this, and even by the Holy Spirit we shall not fully, completely understand it either, this side of eternity. That is why the Lord instructs us in this matter and tells us that when we are tempted to mourn for the church, we are rather to rejoice with her.

In other words, *"Be sure to look at all this in the right light. When you are tempted to mourn for the church, to pity her or her Saviour, don't do it. Rather rejoice!"*

It is fitting that this admonition comes right in the middle of the Lenten season at a time when we might otherwise be overwhelmed with sorrow and grief. Instead, we are to remember all through the sorrowful Lenten season that Easter is coming. The suffering of our Lord was necessary and preliminary to

the joy of Easter, as the birthpains of a mother are necessary and preliminary to the joy of seeing her child.

Rejoice with the Suffering Church

When we see the church suffer today, we also are to rejoice with her! Have we ever done so? I wonder whether any of us have ever had a feeling of inner joy well up within us when we read or heard of Christians suffering and dying for their faith in various places on earth! Instinctively we feel sorry for such witnesses of our Lord, pity them, and breathe a prayer that God would put an end to such persecution.

Is this what God wants us to do? Perhaps this should be part of our reaction. But the main idea and feeling within us should be one of joy. Let us thank God that the time is here once again when Christians in many parts of the world have to stand up and be counted, when they must confess their faith before the world and even die a martyr's death.

Let us pray that God would strengthen the faith of His faithful witnesses everywhere so that they may remain steadfast unto the end, and by the confession of their faith bring others to faith even while they themselves are dying for their living Lord. Many have laid down their life for their Lord in your lifetime and mine.

Let us rejoice that this was possible by God's grace and mercy and strength. Let us pray that the Lord would always preserve us in a joyous faith, so that we, too, may be ready at any time to make such a confession and die such a death. The Lord of the church always supplies the church's need — strength and joy in time of temptation and persecution.

And when you suffer as an individual Christian, remember that you are not alone. You are a member of the great Christian church on earth and in heaven. The individual does not suffer in isolation, but always in the community of the church.

Just as the church is the arena of temptation, so it is the arena of that joy inspired by her Lord's victory on the cross and at Easter. Therefore the thought that we are part of the suffering and victorious church, members of the suffering and victorious body of Christ, fills us with gladness, courage, and boldness.

You will notice that nothing has been said about God supplying the temporal needs of the church members. This He does, too, but this is not the subject today. Here we are concerned with the thought that the Lord supplies the church's need. That need is the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

This has been supplied to every member by the Lord Jesus Christ through faith wrought by God's Holy Spirit. Another need of the church is for it, including all its members, to remain steadfast in the faith, and active in the work of the Lord. This ability the Lord also supplies through His Word and the sacraments. Since He does so, the church should rejoice, no matter what the outward circumstances may be which surround the church on earth.

3. We Rejoice Because The Lord Assures The Church's Triumph

Some day, and that day may be nearer than we think, the church will enter upon its glorious, never-ending Finale. To reach this climax is the very purpose for which it was founded. We do not know when this shall be, but we do know that it shall be, for our Lord has told us this in no uncertain terms.

We read in John 14:3, *I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.* This glorious day is the goal that stands before us. We should long for the day when we shall stand in the glorious presence of our Saviour. Such longing will strengthen us and enable us to bear up under the burdens of life and the tribulations of the church.

The Joy of Anticipation

How often have we not been crushed by the cruelty and misery of life, and in such times of grief and tribulation looked toward heaven and prayed for the coming of Christ's kingdom. Yes, sometimes there dwells within our heart, deeper than the love of life itself, the longing for heaven. This is God-pleasing. A spirit of anticipation, of eager longing, even of impatience for the Day of the Lord, is well-pleasing to Him who taught us to pray, *"Thy kingdom come."*

The divine assurance of the ultimate triumph of the church is a source of great joy and comfort and encouragement to us now. Don't you think that every soldier who goes forth to battle the enemy would be a better soldier if he knew beforehand that he would gain the victory?

That is the kind of soldiers we are in the army of the Lord. He has assured us that in the end we shall be victorious. All the mighty enemies of the Lord will fall and serve as the Lord's footstool. We who worship our everlasting Lord shall reign with Him in glory. This is what is in store for us. This is not a pious wish. These are eternal facts revealed to us by God Himself.

Future Triumph Spurs Us On

Why did the Lord reveal these facts to us? To encourage us, to make us happy and joyful and grateful and to spur us on to ever greater efforts in the work of His kingdom! With success assured, what is holding us back? Why are we so hesitant to launch out into the deep? Is it not, because all too often, the joy of our faith is lacking in us, and our faith in God's promises is often so very weak?

The Lord Jesus was encouraged in His suffering by the prospect of great joy which would be His when He had redeemed the world and could assure men of everlasting life. The Book of Hebrews says of Him, "*Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross.*"²

You are a child of God. Look into your own heart and see there the living faith which the Holy Spirit has created in you.

In this Lenten season turn to the Saviour on His cross and see Him in His redemptive sacrifice and His magnificent victory over the devil and all the forces of darkness, and then you will know that you have reason to rejoice as a child of God, a member of God's holy Christian church on earth. That Saviour has made you a child of God. He has made you a member of His church on earth and provides for your needs in that church.

Look also into the future, into the future beyond the future, and see the great consummation of God's kingdom! You know that no matter what happens in Europe or Russia or in the Far East or in the Middle East, or what happens in Australia, or what happens to your job, or your home or your children or your health — God's kingdom will continue to grow and flourish unto the end, when it will triumph over all opposition.

Let this assurance lie deep in your heart. All the other hopes of men perish in the grave; this hope alone survives the grave. In this hope you can live joyously and die peacefully. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Gal. 3:26

² Heb. 12:2