

JOY:FULLY LUTHERAN

1 THESS 5:16-18

REJOICE / PRAY / GIVE THANKS



/ CONVENTION BIBLE STUDY / LEADER GUIDE

2019



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
Tampa, FL ■ July 20–25, 2019



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Introduction

Joy:fully Lutheran.

Truth be told, there was a time when I just might have considered that an oxymoron.

Back in eighth grade or so, I remember attending some non-denominational event that featured a speaker with a reputation for firing up youth and their commitment to Jesus. He was an engaging sort: he made an impression upon me. In fact, these decades later I still remember one line from his personal testimony. He said, “I grew up Lutheran, but I got tired of feeling bad about my sins all the time.”

Thankfully, he didn’t mean he liked feeling good about his sins. But sadly, he apparently thought that Lutherans began the service by saying, “I am a poor, miserable sinner,” and then called it a day. It wasn’t the best review of my upbringing. All the same, he had an engaging style and played a mean guitar; and I’ve got to admit that my home church at the time seemed sort of embarrassed about being Lutheran. So, as that speaker urged us to commit ourselves more to Jesus that day, I resolved that I’d give his brand of theology a go for a little while.

I can say with certainty that the months that followed were some of the most joyless of my life. I’m not blaming the speaker. There were a ton of factors involved — not the least of which was that I was an eighth-grade kid going through puberty and coping badly with all the social awkwardness that it brings — but boy, howdy, deciding I wasn’t going to be poor and miserable anymore only left me poorer and ... “miserabler.”

It didn’t last forever. Time passed. I am pleased to report that I later resolved never to go through puberty again, and I have succeeded.

Even better, by the grace of God, I came to appreciate how joyful, peace-filled and comforting Lutheran theology is. Oddly enough (or perhaps not!) I came to realize this on one of the worst days of my life. That’s a story best told over a beer sometime, and I would even let you buy.

“Joy:fully Lutheran” makes total sense to me now: because joy is found where Christ is found, and Lutheran theology is all about being found in Christ, with Christ.

In the following lessons, we’re going to take a look at what it means to be joyfully Lutheran. We’ll start with sources of joy, then move on to joy in worship. Then we’ll take some time to look at finding joy during two unavoidable parts of life — your daily callings and times of trouble. We’ll finish with a look at the joy of the resurrection and eternal life.

In a world so joyless as this one, we have the message of Christ that gives grace and peace, enlightening hearts and enlivening souls. There are so many pressures to hide the Gospel under a bushel basket, or to downplay our confession of faith. It is time to do the opposite. Let us proclaim what we believe, loud and clear, knowing why we do so.

Let us be fully Lutheran, for there we will be joyfully Lutheran.

Timothy Pauls

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

BOISE, IDAHO

ADVENT, 2018

Lesson 1: Where True Joys are Found

Rejoice Always

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O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

— COLLECT FOR EASTER 5 (LSB Altar Book, p. 701)

Warm Up: Over the next five lessons, we will explore what it means to be joyfully Lutheran, seeking to expand upon St. Paul's instructions in 1 Thess. 5:16–18:

Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Take a moment to reflect: what do these verses mean to you now? What do you think of when you hear them?

Answers will vary. Some might hear them merely as guidelines for a happier life, while those who are undergoing suffering may see them as demands that are difficult to keep. It's a good time to take note of the answers, and it's entirely possible that the last question in Lesson 5 may be very much like this one.

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If we're going to talk about being joyfully Lutheran, we should begin with the source of joy.

The collect for Easter 5 (above) is one of my favorites. We pray for true joys. Now, it's obvious that the opposite of "true" is "false," but "true" has a bigger meaning than that. It often includes the sense of "certain," "reliable" and "enduring." It can also mean "loyal," as in, "he was faithful and true."

True joy, then, is joy that is genuine, joy that endures, joy that is certain, joy that doesn't end. That's a tall order!

1. We want to identify true joy. But first, let's look at some examples of untrue joy. What might be an example of joy that is false, short-lived, uncertain or temporary?

Answers may vary, but any joy that we derive from things in this world is uncertain and transitory, because everything in this world is passing away. An example of false joy might be when people feign joy in greeting one another when they don't mean it, or of feeling that they must act joyful at a celebration even if they are sorrowful inside. An example of short-lived joy

might be the joy of a new car ... until the first scratch, a promising relationship that falls apart, or one's favored team winning the championship — only to miss the playoffs the following year. An example of uncertain joy might be expectant parents who have been informed that their unborn child might have a serious health condition, or an individual who is starting a promising new job with high hopes and a serious angst.

The point of the question is to introduce several examples to demonstrate that joy in the things of this world isn't fully true. It might be pure joy, but it doesn't last; or it might be an enduring joy, but it's not pure (because even a lifelong, joyful marriage has its ups and downs).

2. If we're going to find true joy that is genuine, enduring, certain and faithful, we're going to have to look somewhere besides the things of this world. Our first stop is Gal. 5:22–23. Where do we find true joy?

True joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a gift of God! True joy is not something that we need to manufacture, but it's a blessing bestowed by the Lord Himself. If it is a gift of God, it is by definition good, genuine, enduring, certain and faithful.

Let's explore this true joy by means of the parables of Jesus in Luke 15.

3. In response to the grumbling of the Scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus tells three parables. What is the Pharisees' complaint — what issue is Jesus addressing (15:1–2)?

They are complaining that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them.” Everyone is a sinner, of course, but the “sinners” to whom the Pharisees refer are those like prostitutes who make little pretense of trying to obey the law. A meal is a big thing! Sharing a meal is an expression of fellowship and hospitality, and the Pharisees are scandalized that Jesus would show such hospitality to sinners.

4. In response, Jesus first tells the parable of the lost sheep (LUKE 15:3–7). What does the shepherd do in

verses 4–6? Who rejoices as a result? Jesus “decodes” the parable for us a bit in verse 7: who is the “shepherd”? Who are the “friends” and “neighbors”? Where are they and why do they rejoice?

In verses 4–6, the shepherd seeks out one lost sheep; and when he finds it, he carries it home rejoicing. Once he is home, he calls upon his friends and neighbors to rejoice. In verse 7, Jesus locates this celebration of joy in heaven: He is the shepherd who has sought out the lost sheep (JOHN 10:11–16), and so it is the heavenly hosts who rejoice in one sinner who repents!

5. Jesus next tells the parable of the lost coin (LUKE 15:8–10). What does the woman do in verses 8–9? Who rejoices? Jesus decodes this parable for us briefly in verse 10. Who is rejoicing, where and why?

In verses 8–9, a woman loses one coin out of ten, and sweeps the house diligently until she finds it. When she does, she calls upon friends and neighbors to celebrate. Once again, Jesus locates the celebration in heaven: the “friends” and “neighbors” of the parable are the angels who rejoice over one sinner who repents!

There might be some question as to why the parable of the lost coin — a close parallel to the parable of the lost sheep — features a woman. Given the culture in which we live, we should button down the question, “Does the woman symbolize Jesus, as did the shepherd?” The answer is ... maybe. This is not the only place where Jesus tells pair-able parables that feature a man and a woman (see LUKE 13:18–21), so this may merely be another example of His inclusion of both sexes in His parables. It might also be that the woman symbolizes the Church, the Bride of Christ, for it is by her labors on earth that the lost are found. See the comments on the parable in the Arthur Just's Concordia Commentary, Luke 9:52–24:53 (St. Louis: 1997, p. 591). Whatever the answer, the point of the parable is not the decided sex of the Son of God, but rather the joy of heaven over repentant sinners.

6. If you'll permit me a personal note here, I'll confess that I'm a lazy cheapskate; and in pondering these texts,

I've put myself in the shoes of the shepherd and the woman. If I have to go find a sheep that was foolish enough to wander away, and I have to carry it back on my shoulders, there is no way I'm going to do it joyfully. Likewise, if I recover a lost coin, I'm not going to make a big deal with friends and neighbors because ... well, then I'd have to supply food and beverages, and I'd risk spending more money than the coin was worth. In other words, the shepherd and the woman seem way too joyful for me. But what does this tell you about the joy of heaven?

It's extravagant and exuberant! And if there is such joy over one sinner who repents, how much do the Lord and His angels rejoice over all of His people?!

Now read Luke 15:11–32.

7. Summarize verses 11–16. What does the younger son request, and how awful a request is it? What does he do with his share, and what happens when it's gone? How is this similar to a sinner's natural treatment of God?

The younger son requests his share of the inheritance; and since inheritances are received upon the death of the giver, he is announcing to his father that he would rather consider him dead and get his share of his fortune now. The father, rather astonishingly, gives it to him. The son doesn't just lose it: he squanders it on reckless and immoral living. (If the son's request wasn't bad enough at first blush, his demand turns out to be, "Father, I wish you were dead so that I could spend your money on prostitutes"!) When the fortune is gone, the son has nothing left; and since he can't go home after declaring his father dead to his father's face, he is reduced to live with the pigs that he feeds — and he's jealous of their food supply.

8. The son decides to risk going home, and so he composes a three-point speech in verses 17–19. Note the three parts.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

*"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."
"Treat me as one of your hired servants."*

9. When the father sees him coming (v. 20), what does he do? Why is this remarkable?

The father runs to the son with compassion. Given his position as father, the son should approach him; and given the conditions of the son's departure from home, it would be remarkable enough if the father waited for the son to arrive and gave him the time of day. But the father sprints to his son, embraces him and kisses him.

10. In verse 21, the son begins his three-point speech, but the father doesn't let him finish. Which parts does he allow his son to say, and which part is never said? Why? What does the father do now that this worthless son has come home (vv. 22–24)?

The son says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Both of these are statements of fact, and they are undeniably true: in other words, the father allows the son to confess his sin and his sinful condition. But the son never gets to say, "Treat me as one of your hired servants." The father will have none of that: this is his son, not a worker who has to earn his keep. The father forgives him and restores him as his son. Not only that, but he restores him with joy! He commands that a banquet be held in his honor!

11. What does the parable *so far* teach about sinners and God's attitude toward them? (see 1 JOHN 1:8–9)

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 JOHN. 1:8–9).

Though we sinners misuse God's gifts so terribly and constantly, He desires that we be His forgiven children. He does not call us servants who must daily earn our keep and prove our worthiness; for the sake of Jesus, He calls us His children.

12. We still have the older son to deal with. Why is the older son angry (vv. 25–28)?

After a hard day's work (maybe doubly hard since his brother left), he arrives from the fields to find

that his brother is home — and that his father is celebrating with a party! For all we know, the older son could be one of those lazy cheapskates who doesn't like carrying lost sheep and pinches pennies; but even if he is, doesn't it seem unfair?

13. Summarize the older son's angry speech in verses 29–30. Here's the riddle: from the three-point speech of the younger son in verses 18–19 and the father's remarks in 22–24, how is the older son thinking like his brother and not like his father?

Like his brother, the older son believes that sonship is earned, not given. In his opinion, his brother isn't a son because he hasn't earned it; and he himself is a son because he has earned it through his years of service.

14. How does the father respond to his older son (vv. 31–32)?

As he did with his younger son, the father declares to him that he is his son — because he is by birth, not because he has earned sonship.

15. What do verses 25–32 teach us about sinners and God's attitude toward them?

Even though we are tempted to believe that we have earned the right to be children of God, God continually declares that we are children in His household.

16. How does this parable end in verse 32, and how is this like the conclusion of the parables of the lost sheep (v. 7) and the lost coin (v. 10)?

It ends with joy — specifically, it ends with joy that a lost sinner has been found and returned home.

17. A reason for joy: how can you be sure that you are a child in the household of God (GAL. 4:4–7)? How can you be certain that this has been done to you (JOHN 3:5)?

Christ redeemed you by His death so that you might be adopted into His family and be an heir of His kingdom. He has given you this adoption in your Baptism.

18. Remarkably, what is the reason that Jesus did this in Heb. 12:2?

Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him: the joy of your redemption and salvation. Because He suffered on the cross in your place, the angels rejoice over you!

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Why is there joy in heaven?

There is joy in heaven over you because Jesus came to earth; and when Jesus came to earth, He brought joy with Him for you. That joy is true joy — it is certain, reliable, faithful and enduring. It will not disappoint because the source is not your successes, your attitude or your emotional energy. Your source of true joy is the Son of God who, by His grace, has made you a beloved, baptized child of God.

Where Jesus is, you will find true joy. Don't take this for granted! One of the great strengths of Lutheran theology is that it's built upon Christ and saturated with Him ... which means that joy permeates all that we believe. This constant presence of Jesus in what we believe is one of the reasons why it makes perfect sense to be joyfully Lutheran.

Next time, then, we'll look at His delivery of this joy to you. But before you go:

Rejoice! From this lesson or from the past few days, make a quick list of reasons for joy. These can be true and lasting joys from heaven, or joy in the gifts that God provides for this body and life.

Give thanks! From this lesson or from the past few days, make a quick list of reasons to give thanks to God.

Pray! Give praise and thanks to the Lord for the joys and gifts He has provided, and commend to Him all your worries and needs. Close with the Lord's Prayer.

Sing! "As Rebels, Lord, Who Foolishly Have Wandered" (LSB 612) is a beautiful hymn based upon the joy of the prodigal son's father — and your Heavenly Father's love for you in Christ. Another great option is "God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It" (LSB 594).

Lesson 2: Joyful Worship

Pray without Ceasing

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What more can we do before God that is greater than these two services — the services of prayer and thanksgiving? In the first place, one must hear the Word, which is given to us by God. Here we do nothing, but we only take hold of what has been offered. In the second place, one must pray and implore God's help after the Word has been heard and taken hold of, and after getting this help one must give thanks and offer sacrifice. But we pray not only with the mouth or the voice but also with sobbing of the heart, with all our strength and members. This is prayer without ceasing.

— MARTIN LUTHER, AE 5:357

Warm Up: Today we're going to talk about joy in worship. Before we do, take a few minutes and think of as many hymns as you possibly can that include a form of the word "joy" or "rejoice."

Answers will vary.

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Is Lutheran worship joyful? It ought to be, sure, but this question may spur some debate. Some would say that traditional, liturgical worship doesn't lend itself to joy — as someone once quipped, who but Lutherans sing, "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus!" while sitting down? Others might say it's difficult to find joy when there's tension in the congregation because of financial problems, attendance numbers, disagreements or something else. You might find joy difficult to discover at church after a bad night of sleep or some personal trial, or because you'd rather be standing knee deep in a trout stream.

Perhaps, though, we're looking for the wrong sort of joy. Or maybe we're looking in the wrong places.

Speaking of trout streams and the like ... as the story goes, Martin Luther faced the same tepid argument that many pastors hear in our present day: "Pastor, since God is everywhere, then I can worship Him out in the trout stream (or the forest or my bed) instead of church, right?"

Luther supposedly responded, "Of course God is there. But He is not there *for you*."

I haven't been able to track down that story; and in my mind, I imagine the Reformer getting agitated and saying in a terrible German accent, "Und vat duss he gif you in ze traut stream? Traut, you [insert favorite Luther insult here]! Und vat does he gif you in church? His Son!"

I digress. As I said, I don't know if the story is true, but I do know that Luther wrote this: "[God] is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way." (AE 36:342)

We learned in Lesson 1 that true joy is found where Jesus is, so now we're going to see why Lutheran worship is joyful — *joy-filled!* To do so, we are going to look at five of the most commonly sung songs throughout the Church. Not every worship service will use them, but they do a great job of illustrating why Lutheran worship is a joyful thing indeed.

Song #1: Read Luke 17:11–19.

1. Who calls out to Jesus, and what do they cry? What do they have to give in exchange for Jesus' help?

Ten lepers cry out to Jesus, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (LUKE 17:13). Because of their disease, they are quarantined outside of the village and isolated from family, friends and society. They have nothing to offer to Jesus in exchange for help: if He is going to help them, it is only because He is gracious and merciful.

2. What does Jesus do? How does He treat those who show no gratitude?

Jesus tells them to show themselves to the priests: and since they would only do this for readmission into society after being healed, Jesus has spoken words to heal them. Indeed, as they go to show themselves to the priests, they find they are healed. Nine of them show no gratitude whatsoever: how does Jesus treat them? Mercifully, He preserves their health: He does not punish them for their ingratitude by making them lepers again.

3. When you come to worship, are you like the ten at the beginning, or the Samaritan who comes back? Why?

We come to worship like the ten lepers. Our skin might be flawless, but we suffer the "leprosy of sin" (LSB 435:2), the curse of sin that is rotting us from the inside out. When we come to worship,

we have nothing with which to purchase God's help and favor: instead, we rightly confess that we are sinners who don't deserve His help, but for Jesus' sake we are bold to ask for it anyway!

Honestly, we are probably like the nine lepers in that we are far less thankful for God's gifts than we should be.

In worship, we are also like the Samaritan who comes back. Knowing that the Lord has washed away our sin and cleansed us in Holy Baptism, we return to give thanks to the Lord and to receive more of His gifts. As Jesus spoke of faith and health to the thankful Samaritan, so He continues to strengthen our faith by his Word in worship today.

4. Do we sing the lepers' cry as part of worship? Why? What reason for joy do we share with them?

We do sing the lepers' cry, although it's not exclusive to the lepers in the Bible: it's the Kyrie, or "Lord have mercy." We sing it for the same joyful reason: though hidden in His Word and Sacraments, the same Jesus is just as present with us as He was that day with them. And rather than "merely" heal us of a terminal flesh-eating illness, He delivers us from sin, death and the devil. He does this solely out of His own grace and mercy, so we can be sure He is always present, ready to forgive.

Song #2: Read Luke 2:8–16.

5. What does the angel announce to the shepherds? What does the choir of angels sing afterwards?

The angel declares to the shepherds that the Savior is born: the Son of God is now flesh and blood. Not only that, but He's close: He's wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in nearby Bethlehem. The Christ is so nearby and findable that the shepherds can see Him, point to Him.

This is joyful news, and so the angel host sings, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (LUKE 2:14).

6. Having heard the angels, what do the shepherds do in response? What do they have to give to Jesus?

The shepherds hurry to Bethlehem to see the Child. They have nothing to offer to the Messiah, but they go to find Him because the angel has instructed them. Seriously, who wouldn't want to see the Messiah after hearing the angels' announcement?

7. When you come to worship, how are you like the shepherds as they make haste to Bethlehem?

You have heard where you can find the Messiah: the same Jesus whom they could see in a crib with flesh and blood, can be found today in His Word and His Supper — body, blood and all! If the Savior is so near, why would we not make haste?

8. Why would we sing the angels' song as part of worship? What reason for joy do you share with the angels?

The *Gloria in Excelsis* — “Glory to be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men” (DS III, LSB 187) — announces the joy that Jesus, who became flesh and dwelt among us, still dwells among us today in the Means of Grace.

Song #3, Part 1: Read Is. 6:1–3.

9. Where does this take place? Who is crying out? What are they calling to each other, and why are they doing it there and then?

This takes place in Isaiah's vision of heaven. The Lord is enthroned in glory, and seraphim — heavenly creatures — are crying out to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Is. 6:3). Why are they doing it there and then? Because the Lord of hosts is there, then.

10. What is the Lord doing in Isaiah 6 (see Ps. 103:19)?

The Lord is ruling over all things for our good. (What comfort! What joy!)

Song #3, Part 2: Matt. 21:6–9

11. Why are the crowds crying out, and what are they shouting?

The crowds are crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (MATT. 21:9). It's Palm Sunday, and Jesus is riding into Jerusalem. He is the Messiah, the One “who comes in the name of the Lord;” and He rides into Jerusalem to save the world by His sacrificial death on the following Friday and His resurrection on the third day.

12. When you come to worship, how are you like the crowds?

We need the salvation that Jesus brings.

13. Song #3, known as the *Sanctus*, combines two readings: an Old Testament vision that takes place in heaven and a New Testament text that takes place on earth. Why would we sing the song of the seraphim and the song of the Palm Sunday crowds in worship — and right before Holy Communion? What joy do we share with them?

This is profound: the same Jesus who is enthroned in heaven, ruling over all things and is surrounded by seraphim, is also present with us on earth — in, with and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion. As He is present in both places, we sing the praise of the heavenly host (Is. 6:3) and the praise of His people on earth (MATT. 21:9).

(In fact, remember the preface that normally leads into this song: “Therefore *with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*, we [on earth] laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You and saying”)

Song #4: Read John 1:19–29.

14. Who do the priests and Levites think that John the Baptist might be? Who does John say that he is (v. 23), and what does this mean?

The priests and Levites speculate that John is the Messiah, or perhaps Elijah or the Prophet. John identifies himself as the fulfillment of the

prophecy in Is. 40:3. He is preparing the way of the Lord. This means that (a) the Messiah is the Lord Himself and (b) He is about to arrive!

15. According to John, where is the Messiah in verse 26?

John says that Jesus is there — in the crowd! However, the priests and Levites can't identify Him because He looks like a normal, unremarkable human being (Is. 53:2).

16. How do people find out the identity of the Messiah (29)? What is He called, and what does this mean?

People find out that Jesus is the Messiah by the Word of God: John speaks and proclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (JOHN 1:29)

17. Why is Jesus there — what has just happened to Him (see v. 32) and why?

Jesus has just been baptized. He has taken His place with sinners, and He is going to bear their sins and infirmities to the cross.

18. Why would we sing John's words in verse 29 as part of worship, just before the Lord's Supper? What joy do we share with John?

The *Agnus Dei* — "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world" — declares that the same Jesus who took our place on the cross, died and rose again, is now as present with us as He was with John the Baptist at the Jordan River. With us, He is present in His Means of Grace. What joy!

Song #5: Read Luke 2:25–33

19. Whom does Simeon meet? Summarize his blessing.

Simeon meets Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus at the temple. Taking Jesus in his arms, Simeon praises God that the Christ has come for all people; and knowing that Jesus is his salvation, Simeon can die in peace.

20. Why would we sing Simeon's blessing as part of worship — especially after we've just received the

Lord's Supper? What joy do we share with Simeon?

Simeon held the flesh-and-blood baby Jesus in his arms, thankful that the Savior had come to him. In the Lord's Supper, we receive the body and blood of Jesus; and because He gives us Himself, His forgiveness and salvation, we can die in peace. What joy!

21. Take the joy of the lepers, the angels, the seraphim and Palm Sunday crowds, John the Baptist and Simeon, and summarize it in one sentence: "The joy we share with them is that ..."

Answers will vary, but should sound something like this: "the same Jesus who was present with them is present with us; and this Jesus comes with grace and mercy, and with His body and blood, to heal us of our sin, to give us peace and salvation, even while He still reigns over all things for our good."

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True joys are found where Jesus is found, and Jesus is found in His Means of Grace. That's what worship is all about: the Lord comes to us, forgiving our sins — and, of course, we respond with prayer, praise and thanksgiving. As Luther writes in the paragraph at the top of our lesson, this is the content of our unceasing prayer.

Now, I'll admit that I've been to a few services that were less than emotionally inspiring, but that doesn't mean that Jesus was less present or less joy-filled. It might mean that I had a bad night of sleep, or I was easily-distracted. It might mean that other sinners in the room were distracting. But that wasn't the fault of the worship — it was the weakness of human flesh. Where the Word is preached in its truth and purity, and where the Sacraments are administered according to that Word, the Lord Jesus is present with all of His gifts to give.

This is also why joy can be found in worship even on the worst of days: if Christ is present to forgive your sins, then you know that the days of trouble are numbered. One way or another, He will deliver you.

It's why one of my favorite verses is Ps. 16:11: "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Indeed, because Christ is present to save in His Means of Grace, there is no better place in the world to be joyfully Lutheran than worship.

Of course, you can't be at church all the time; next time, we'll take a look at joy as you go about your daily callings. But before you go:

Rejoice! From this lesson or from the past few days, make a quick list of reasons for joy. These can be true and lasting joys from heaven, or joy in the gifts that God provides for this body and life.

Give thanks! From this lesson or from the past few days, make a quick list of reasons to give thanks to God.

Pray! Give praise and thanks to the Lord for the joys and gifts He has provided, and commend to Him all your worries and needs. Close with the Lord's Prayer.

Sing! "The Gifts Christ Freely Gives" (*LSB* 602) certainly rejoices in the Lord's presence in His Means of Grace. "Once He Came in Blessing" (*LSB* 333) is a classic Advent hymn, but it's also a profound song about worship until the Lord returns in glory.

Lesson 3: Joyful Vocations

Give Thanks in All Circumstances

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Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn, like that of the Ten Commandments, or whatever your devotion may suggest.

— MARTIN LUTHER, (Small Catechism, Daily Prayers)

Warm Up: To get things rolling, take a few minutes and think of every Bible verse you can that has some form of the words “joy” or “rejoice.”

Answers will vary.

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We often look ahead to special events, like holidays and birthdays, because we anticipate that they will be times of joyful celebration. But not every day is a holiday, we can't always be on vacation, and I know plenty of retirees who say they're just as busy as ever — except there's no day off! Is there joy in the normal day? The pesky day job? The average Wednesday? (Personally, I have yet to figure out Wednesdays.)

Are we overlooking immense amounts of joy and numerous causes for rejoicing?

When Luther writes in the Small Catechism about

beginning your day with prayer, he counsels you to ... I tell you what: try it right here, right now.

- First, make the sign of the cross and say, “In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- Second, say the Apostles’ Creed.
- Third, pray the Lord’s Prayer.
- Finally, says Luther, pray this “little prayer:” “I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen ¹”

¹ Small Catechism, Daily Prayers: Morning Prayer, page 30

Then, says Luther, go joyfully to your work.

1. If you're now to go joyfully about your work, it would seem that these four parts of Luther's morning prayer are meant to give you joy. Let's take a look: what about the Invocation, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and morning prayer might make you joyful?

The Invocation can be a great source of joy, because — along with the sign of the cross — it's a reminder of your Baptism. No matter what the day holds, you're going into it as one who has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus and born again as God's beloved child; and the Lord will use the events of the day for your good (Rom. 8:28). The Invocation might also remind of the forgiveness given in the Absolution, or provide joy because the next church service is on its way.

The Creed is full of joy because it talks all about the triune God in whose name you've been baptized. See the explanation in the Apostles' Creed to see how your Baptism personalizes the Lord's work to you. God the Father is not just the Creator of heaven and earth, but also the God who created *you* and provides *you* with everything you need to support this body and life. Jesus Christ — his only Son, our Lord — was born, stricken, crucified, raised, ascended and is coming again *for you!* Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit continues to sanctify *you* and keep *you* in the true faith. You don't know what the day will bring, but what God does for you is in the bag!

The Lord's Prayer teaches us to seek all that we need from God, so you pray it with the joy that God hears your prayers and will answer and provide in the way that is best for you.

Finally, in the "little" morning prayer, you have the joy that the Lord has kept you safe through the night, and that He promises His help (and even holy angels) to guard you from evil throughout the day. In a beautiful turn of phrase, the prayer hints at Jesus' death for your redemption: because Jesus commended Himself into His father's hands at His death (LUKE 23:46), you can commend yourself into His hands as you live and

when you die.

You start your day as a child of God, redeemed by Christ. The evil foe has no power over you. How's that for a joyful start to the day?

To set the stage for talking further about our daily callings, read Eccl. 5:10–20.

2. What is *not* the end goal or great reward of labor (10–11)? Is this surprising?

Income and goods are not the end of labor: the author calls them vanity! This is certainly counter-intuitive to a materialistic culture like our own. I recall a bumper sticker from a few years back which read, "He who dies with the most toys wins!"

3. What does the Preacher — the author of Ecclesiastes (1:1) — call these things? What are their limits?

The preacher calls these things vanity, for they have no eternal meaning. Wealth brings its share of headaches: in this case, the one who gains wealth finds that many gather to make use of his goods for themselves (5:11). The Preacher also notes that "the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep:" this is not just a matter of over-eating, but a poetic allusion that an abundance of wealth can cause anxiety, worry, dissatisfaction and thus sleeplessness. Furthermore, riches are easily lost through bad ventures (5:13), not to mention economic downturns or crime. Finally, after potentially causing all sorts of vexation, wealth and material goods have no eternal benefit (5:15–17): none of our possessions leave this world with us.

4. The Preacher writes that it is good to "find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life" (18), whether one is wealthy or poor. Why?

We should enjoy our toil and our days because God has given them to us; and when God gives us gifts, He does so carefully, in His wisdom and love, for our good. We might not understand why God gives us the labors that He does, but we can be sure that He uses all things — our toil included

— for our good.

5. In fact, what happens to those who rejoice in work and God who gives it? (19)

The days of life and toil, with all of their hardship and trouble, are forgotten because the Lord keeps them occupied with joy!

Every day, every old normal day, you have things to do; and if you make a list of those things, you'll find that they're related to your vocations, or callings. Your vocations are those stations in life in which God has placed you. The Table of Duties in the Small Catechism lists the following callings: pastors, hearers of the Word, government officials, citizens, husbands, wives, parents, children, workers, bosses, youth, widows and everyone.

6. We can take these various callings and group them under three estates. What are they? Read the following verses: what does God give in each of the following verses?

a. Gen. 2:15

God gives the gift of labor. While this originally means stewardship of the earth and the labor of farming, we could group those jobs of industry, agriculture, business, etc.

b. Gen. 2:16–17

This is, perhaps, the most obscure of the three texts, but here God gives the gift of church: Luther notes that it is here that God gives the gift of His Word to Adam; and in doing so, He gives the gift of church because Adam has his Word to preach to others.

c. Gen. 2:24

In instituting marriage, God gives the gift of family. It's within this estate that children are to be conceived, born and raised.

7. Look at each of these three estates (and the Table of Duties). Can you make a list of the calling(s) you hold in each?

Answers will vary depending on the person, but the callings may be many. For instance, a woman might be a wife, daughter, mother, sister, neighbor; teacher; hearer of the Word and supporter of the church.

8. Different callings have purposes, rules, responsibilities and rewards. For instance, consider a man who is a son, a husband and a computer programmer. How are these vocations different?

Answers will vary, but a son is born/adopted into the family and so the vocation is given with no work or consent on his part. It is governed by the Fourth Commandment, and so the son is to honor his parents for life. He becomes a husband voluntarily by his marriage vows: that calling lasts for life as he is commanded to love his wife sacrificially, and the reward is companionship and children as the Lord wills. As a computer programmer, his vocation is established by mutual agreement (a contract). It is not a lifelong commitment, and the reward is primarily a salary.

9. All of these callings find their origin in Genesis 2. Look at the timing! When are these given? What hasn't happened yet? Are these estates given to be *enjoyed*?

These estates and their callings are given before the fall into sin: they are gifts intended for Paradise! They cannot not be enjoyed in the garden without sin.

10. Given the answer to the previous question, imagine these estates in a perfect world. What is meant to be enjoyable about labor, church and marriage?

Answers will vary, but we are created to labor and to serve. When it comes to labor, we find great satisfaction in completing tasks, getting work done and seeing we've managed to accomplish something at the end of the day (and contrarily, there are few things worse than being bored!). Labor in service to others is called love, and love builds friendship and community. Marriage was given to provide the joys of companionship, intimacy and children. Church would certainly be a source of joy in paradise, where God and man would interact face to face without fear or shame

or any of the other consequences of sin.

11. Read Gen. 3:14–24, where the Lord announces the consequences of the fall into sin. Does each of the three estates suffer because of the fall — can you point out specific words regarding each? Does the Lord provide reason for joy even as He announces the consequences of sin?

The Lord announces the consequences of sin upon the gift of marriage and family in verse 16: the arrival of new life via childbirth should be one of the greatest joys of life, but now it will be accompanied by pain. Furthermore, marriage will become difficult because the wife will desire to control her husband even as he desires to rule over her: rather than joyfully serve one another, each will seek to selfishly use the other. The gift of labor suffers its consequences in verse 18: not only will the earth produce thorns and thistles along with edible plants, but all labor will be troubled by setbacks, failures and trouble. Needless to say, the gift of church is radically damaged: because Adam and Eve have heeded the serpent's temptation over God's Word, God removes them from Paradise. He confirms later (Ex. 33:20) that they can no longer look upon Him face to face, and thus they can no longer be in His glorious presence as they once had.

Furthermore, all of these estates have an expiration date: Adam, Eve and their descendants will all return to the dust. Ultimately, sin gives all of their labors a sense of futility.

But the Lord still provides reason for joy: in fact, before He even announces the consequences of sin, He first declares that the Savior is coming. The offspring (literally, the seed) of the woman will destroy the devil and his work. He will suffer in doing so, but He will be victorious. It's a remarkable reason for joy! The Lord does not leave Adam and Eve without hope, but immediately promises that the Christ will become flesh and save.

In other words, there is cause for joy, even then,

because of Jesus and His saving work.

12. Sin has certainly marred the estates that God established in the garden of Eden, and this in turn will afflict every calling that you ever have. Read, for instance, Col. 3:5. How might these sins affect labor, church and marriage/family?

Answers will vary. Sexual immorality certainly destroys many marriages, and it can have terribly destructive effects on congregations. Passions and evil desires war against humility and servanthood, so that one's callings become ways to take advantage of other people for personal gain. Covetousness of another's things or people (spouses, workers) is idolatry, as one's desire for the possessions of others accuses God of giving the wrong things to the wrong people.

13. Despite so many temptations and attacks of the devil, is it still possible to find joy, enjoy and rejoice in the various callings that God has given you? Read Matt. 22:36–39; Col. 3:23–24 and Eph. 6:5–7. Consider this: all three of these passages primarily are Law; our callings are where God places us to keep the Law, no matter how imperfectly. Think back to question 10 and how all of these callings were meant to be: what can you salvage in a sinful world?

Though afflicted by sin, God's gifts are still good, and we live in this life as those who are redeemed by Christ — and as those with whom the Lord dwells. It is within our various callings that we serve other people, that we love other people. Thus the Lord uses us as His instruments to care for those around us; and even though everything we do is tainted by sin, our love (and imperfect keeping of the Law) is a dim reflection of paradise. Isn't that cause for joy?

14. Recalling the life of joy in lesson 1, what might you do to live joyfully in your callings? What gifts of God are you quick to overlook? What sins especially threaten your joy? Recalling lesson 2 and Luther's morning prayer, what is the remedy for these sins?

Answers to the first three questions will vary. As far as the remedy goes, repentance leads one to confess these sins, trust in Christ and then live as one set free to serve. This is how we get back to

going joyfully about our work.

15. One more to ponder as you go: how might you bring joy to others in your various callings this week? The more specifically you can think of people and actions, the better!

Answers will vary.

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In 1 Kings 8, at long last, it was time to dedicate the temple. It had been 500 years since the Exodus, 100 years since Saul was anointed to be the first king of Israel. After Saul, King David had tried to build the temple, but the Lord forbade him; and it was finally given to King Solomon to build and dedicate the House of God. On this day as numerous sacrifices were offered, the priests placed the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place. Then they had to make a quick exit, because the glory of the Lord filled the room: God Most High had arrived to dwell with His people.

Solomon offered prayers that are recorded in 1 Kings 8. He gave thanks that the Lord was faithful to His promises, and then he returned to the same theme repeatedly: again and again, he called upon the Lord to hear the prayers of His penitent people. Then he turned and blessed the people, saying in part, “Blessed be the Lord who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke by Moses his servant” (1 KINGS 8:56).

The rest of the day included thousands of sacrifices, and the people feasted for seven days. The chapter ends with this cheery description: **“On the eighth day he sent the people away, and they blessed the king and went to their homes joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had shown to David his servant and to Israel his people”** (1 KINGS 8:66).

The people went back to their homes — back to their callings and pesky day jobs and the daily grind, joyful and glad of heart for all the Lord’s goodness. Their joy was rooted in God’s grace and mercy.

So it is for you and me. Every day will have its share of thorns and thistles in a sinful world; but the Lord still visits us — not in a cloud of glory, but by means of

words, water, bread and wine. And the Lord still gives us opportunities to labor and love — and all because He has already labored and loved us to the cross and grave, and back again. Whatever the day and the outcome of our labors, we remain His. His gifts of grace and vocation are a big part of what it means to be joyfully Lutheran. What joy indeed!

It’s inevitable that as you go about your callings in a sinful world, though, that sometimes things will go terribly wrong. That’s why next time we’ll talk about joy and suffering ... and maybe even joy *in* suffering. But before you go:

Rejoice! From this lesson or from the past few days of your callings, make a quick list of reasons for joy. These can be true and lasting joys from heaven, or joy in the gifts that God provides for this body and life.

Give thanks! From this lesson or from the past few days of your callings, make a quick list of reasons to give thanks to God.

Pray! Give praise and thanks to the Lord for the joys and gifts He has provided (including that pesky day job!) and commend to Him all your worries and needs. Close with the Lord’s Prayer.

Sing! “With the Lord Begin Your Task” (LSB 869) kicks off a day with a healthy dose of Christ and vocation. Meanwhile, “O Christ, Who Called the Twelve” (LSB 856) declares the joy that Christians carry the light of Jesus with them throughout their callings.

Lesson 4: Joy in Suffering

For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

.....

*Why should cross and trial grieve me?
Christ is near, with His cheer;
Never will He leave me.
Who can rob me of the heaven
That God's Son for me won
When His life was given?*

— PAUL GERHARDT (LSB 756:1)

Warm Up: One of the most joyful expressions in Scripture is the word “Alleluia.” How many hymns can you name that have the word “Alleluia” or “Hallelujah” in them?

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We’re constantly tempted to believe that, since we’re Christians, we shouldn’t suffer. Maybe we avoid that temptation most days; but when suffering does come along, we’re still quick to ask, “Why is this happening to me?” Where God remains silent, the sinful nature is quick to come up with answers that are completely false, like, “God doesn’t care,” or “God is out to get you,” or “You must not have enough faith.” This last one is part of what we’d call a theology of glory, that your life will be glorious and trouble-free if you only believe in Jesus enough. That’s a particularly attractive but hideous lie.

In contrast to a theology of glory, Luther argued for a theology of the cross. In part, this teaches the obvious truth that Christians suffer. It shouldn’t surprise us: we follow in the steps of the One who suffered far worse for our sins on the cross. Sometimes Christians suffer because they are Christians, as in times of persecution. Sometimes they suffer because of sins they commit, sometimes because of sins committed against them. Sometimes it’s just because they still have sin-afflicted bodies on this side of the resurrection, susceptible to illness, age and failure.

The devil wants to use suffering to rob us of God’s gifts of faith and hope and peace. And what about joy? Is there room for joy in suffering? Sooner or later, we each must face this question in practice, so let’s arm ourselves with the Word of the Lord now.

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In the first four chapters of Romans, St. Paul has painstakingly built the case that despite our sinfulness, we are declared righteous for the sake of Jesus. For a quick summary of those chapters, two verses will do the job: read Rom. 3:23–24.

1. Paul writes that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” What does it mean to fall short of God’s glory?

Sinners lack the righteousness necessary to be in the presence of God. Apart from Christ, we are not what God intended us to be; and as long as we remain unforgiven, there is no place for us in the kingdom of God. Thankfully for us, Jesus glorified His Father by bearing our sins to the cross and dying in our place (JOHN 12:27–33). Because of His death for our sins, we look forward to dwelling in God’s glory forever (REV. 21:23).

2. Paul also writes that, “All ... are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” What does “justified” mean, and how is it surprisingly accomplished for us?

The word “justified” means “declared righteous” or “declared not guilty.” It’s a courtroom term: when a defendant is found “not guilty,” he is justified and free to go. By nature before God, we are far from innocent: our sins cling to us as countless exhibits of our guilt. However, God declares us not guilty because Jesus offered Himself for our guilt on the cross (Is. 53:10): because He was stricken by God for our sins there, God now pardons us.

With that wondrous, joyful news of our redemption in Christ, let’s turn to Rom. 5:1–12.

3. Read Rom. 5:1–2. Before St. Paul speaks of suffering, he lays some groundwork by describing us in four different ways.

a. Paul first reminds us that “We have been justified by faith.” When it is given us to suffer, what help is it that we have been justified by faith?

Although it is always important, justification is especially comforting during times of distress when we are afflicted and weakened: Our

standing before God is always based upon the truth that Christ has died for our sins. It does not depend upon our works, which means we need never wonder if we have done well enough lately for God to love us; instead, God always loves us because Christ has died for us; and for His sake, we are holy, wholly not guilty before God.

b. Paul writes that “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (ROM. 5:1). The key word here is “peace:” often, people understand peace to mean the absence of strife, but what does it mean here? How does this comfort and reassure us when we must endure hardship?

Far from being merely an absence of trouble, this peace is the presence of God with His grace and favor, even (and especially) during trouble. If we are at peace with God, it means that God is not acting out of hostility towards us: He is using suffering for our good.

c. Paul writes that “We have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom. 5:2). The sense of “access” is along the lines of having access to a king’s court and help. What is the joy of the “access by faith”? Is there a comfort in the fact that we “stand” (see EPH. 6:13)?

Again, we do not enjoy God’s favor because we have worked for it hard enough, but for the sake of Christ. Because He has died and is risen again, we have access to Him and His help: as surely as He listened when the sick cried, “Lord, have mercy!” throughout the Gospels, so He hears our cries for mercy and help — and hears them favorably! There is joy in standing in the grace of God. On the one hand, it means that we have not fallen in battle or been knocked down by the suffering, no matter how distraught we might feel, because Christ stands for us. On the other, we do not have to advance and conquer because the battle is already won by Christ! In the midst of suffering, it is given to us to cling to His promises.

d. Paul writes that “We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (ROM. 5:2). What is this glory, and how does it offer comfort in a time of affliction?

Remember Rom. 3:23, that sinners fall short of the glory of God because they are unrighteous — but that in Christ, we look forward to dwelling in God’s glory forever. This is a great comfort in times of suffering: your days of affliction are numbered, but your days are not! You have the hope of eternal life in heaven, where “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (REV. 21:4).

The glory of God is found in Christ. As He continues to visit and enliven us in His Means of Grace, He renews in us the hope that our sufferings will end and we will be raised in glory.

e. Bonus question! We’ve encountered “glory” and “peace” together before in this Bible study. When — and why?

When Jesus is born, the angels sing to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (LUKE 2:14) When He enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds cry out, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” (LUKE 19:38) Peace and glory are both found in Jesus: in Luke, He is born to bring us peace by His death, bringing glory to His Father; and in Romans, He has won peace with God so that we might dwell in His glory.

Read Rom. 5:3–5.

4. Paul writes “We rejoice in our sufferings” (ROM. 5:3). (By the way, the word “rejoice” actually has the meaning of “joyfully boast.”) However, Paul doesn’t say that sufferings are the cause of joy. Do we really boast that we are suffering, or are we boasting about something else? For instance, when the disciples are caught in a storm in Luke 8:22–25, it can rightly be said that they are in the midst of the sea; but it is far better news that they are in a boat in the sea. It’s even better news that they are in the boat with Jesus! When Paul says we rejoice — joyfully boast — in our sufferings, what precisely are we joyfully boasting about?

Suffering has a purpose, in that it produces endurance. However, the reason for joy is what Paul has already said in Rom 5:1–2! Despite the tribulation, we know that we are right with God for Jesus’ sake, and that He will deliver us in His time.

5. Paul writes that “suffering produces endurance.” How is this true?

Endurance is the ability to withstand trouble over a long period of time. If life is trouble-free, it is likely that we don’t see our need for God in the first place, or that we take His Word lightly; then when trouble does come, we are quick to doubt His promises. Suffering teaches us that the Lord remains faithful and merciful; as we undergo affliction, we learn to acknowledge our weakness and cling to His enduring help.

6. Paul writes that “endurance produces character.” The word “character” has the sense of “tested-ness,” along the lines of gold that has been tested by fire. How does endurance produce character? What is found to be “gold” in times of such refining, and what is not?

The endurance of suffering builds character in that Christians learn more and more to call upon the Lord for help. As suffering continues, they discover that all the other things in which they were placing trust ultimately fail, but the Lord’s mercy and help remain.

7. Paul writes that “character produces hope.” What is the hope, and how does character produce it?

Again, as suffering proves that everything else eventually fails, it also reveals that Christ does not, and will not, fail His people. As time goes on and His faithfulness becomes more apparent, Christians come to appreciate the certain hope of deliverance that they have in Him.

8. Paul writes that “hope does not put us to shame.” Most likely, he’s talking about the Last Day. What does he mean?

There is no doubt that we will be welcomed into heaven because we are justified by faith for the sake of Jesus. If it were true that we were saved by

our works, we could never be sure that we have done enough to merit eternal life — we could never be sure that we would not be put to shame on Judgment Day forever. (If we were saved by our efforts of enduring suffering, we could never be sure!) But because you are justified for Jesus' sake, your hope is certain because your salvation is guaranteed.

9. Paul writes that our hope is certain because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (ROM. 5:5). Hmmm ... we’re getting very Trinitarian here: The Father has poured out the Spirit on us for Jesus’ sake. When did this take place? See Titus 3:5–6.

God has poured out His Spirit on us in Holy Baptism. This is the joy of saying, “I am baptized!” No matter the trouble going on around you, you’re certain of God’s favor because He has made you His own by water and the Word; and even — especially — in the midst of suffering, His promise remains that “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (MATT. 28:20).

10. We’d better stop here for a moment and make sure we’ve got an important point right. True or false: suffering strengthens faith. Explain your answer.

Because these words have a narrow and a broad sense, one can make a case for either answer, but it’s important to know what one means:

False: suffering doesn’t strengthen faith, because suffering itself isn’t a Means of Grace. Suffering is Law, one of the wages of sin, and the Law doesn’t give faith. The Gospel does! It’s the forgiveness we receive in the Means of Grace that strengthens our faith, whether we are suffering or not.

True: one can argue the statement is true because the *net result* of suffering — assuming one is receiving the Means of Grace — is a strong faith. The suffering teaches us not to put faith in ourselves or other things that fail, while the Means of Grace strengthen our faith in Christ.

11. Read Rom. 5:6–9, where Paul quickly goes back to the Gospel. Why is this so important to keep in mind

when considering times of suffering? To put it another way, how might you respond to a suffering Christian who says, “I think God is out to get me!”?

Suffering leads people to ask all sorts of questions that often can’t be answered, such as, “Why is this happening to me?” Having spoken briefly of suffering, Paul immediately returns to the Good News that Christ has already died for us: therefore, we are saved from God’s wrath. Whatever the reason for suffering, it is not because God is out to get us. God has already “gotten” His Son on the cross for our sins, and so the price for our redemption has been paid in full.

12. Read Heb. 12:5–6. What is one of the reasons that God allows suffering?

Hebrews 12:5–6 approaches suffering this way: because we are justified, we are children of God; and as parents discipline their children for their good, so the Lord disciplines us for our good. It is a matter of discipline — training — as opposed to punishment. In the midst of distress, Christians can be sure that God isn’t “out to get them,” because Jesus has already suffered that wrath on the cross.

13. Summing up, from what you’ve studied in this lesson, what are some reasons for joyful boasting even during times of suffering?

Answers will vary, but they include the joyful truth that:

- We are already justified, and so we endure suffering knowing that the Lord is not angry with us.
- The Lord continually provides forgiveness, strength and faith in His Means of Grace.
- The Lord uses suffering for our good.
- The Lord will deliver us from suffering to everlasting life.

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A few years back, I visited a member who was setting his affairs in order as he’d recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. We talked about what doctors had said he could expect in his remaining days; and I offered,

“You can also expect something else: between now and then, the devil is going to dig up every last sin and parade it in front of your eyes to make you think that God couldn’t love you.”

The man’s response was quick and full of feeling: “What do you mean he’s ‘going to’? He’s already begun!” When death and devil partner together to torment, even the strongest of Christians sees how weak he is.

It’s here that the comfort of the Gospel becomes apparent: if Christ has indeed taken our sins to the cross, there are none left to incur God’s wrath. If we are forgiven, there is nothing to prevent God’s love and salvation. Thus, Luther was known to mock the devil at times, thanking him for reminding him of his sins — and thus reminding him of his need for Jesus; and he was known to mock death, pointing out that it was Christ’s captive whom He used to deliver His people to heaven. This is a hope and a joy that doesn’t disappoint, and I’ve had the pleasure of knowing Christians who were quite joyful to speak of Christ — and poke death in the eye — with some of their final breaths.

Christ has died and Christ is risen: this is the joy that endures in suffering. And because Christ is raised from the dead, He will raise you up to the kingdom of heaven where suffering and sorrow are no more. Luther’s theology of the cross is another reason why it’s a delight to be joyfully Lutheran, because you don’t measure God’s love for you by how much you are, or aren’t, suffering. You know of God’s love for you because He’s given His Son to die on the cross, and keeps visiting with grace in His Word and Sacraments. What certainty! What joy!

As we saw above, suffering doesn’t last forever; and we look forward to the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. We look forward to eternal joy, and so we’ll pick that up in our next lesson. But before you go:

Rejoice! From this study, or from past experiences of suffering, what joys might you find in suffering? For what might you praise God?

Give thanks! From this study, or reflecting upon past experiences of suffering, what might you give thanks to God for?

Pray! With joyful praise and thanks to God for His kindness and mercy, pray also for those who are currently suffering and in need of help.

Sing! When it comes to a meditation of Christ-centered faith in suffering, it’s hard to beat “Why Should Cross and Trouble Grieve Me?” (*LSB* 756). It’s also a great time to sing, “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less” (*LSB* 575/576).

Lesson 5: Joyful Expectation

... It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

(PHIL. 1:20–21)

Warm Up: We've started sessions brainstorming hymns about joy. This time, what hymns do you think of when you want to sing of hope?

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“The hope of the righteous brings joy” (PROV. 10:28).

Scientists speak of potential (stored) energy and kinetic (moving) energy. For instance, a bow has a lot of potential energy when the bowstring is drawn; and when the string is released, the kinetic energy sends the arrow toward the target. I think of hope and joy similarly: the hope that we have is joy stored up, just waiting to be released ... and imagine what that joy will be like on the Last Day.

I keep this in mind because I go to more funerals than most people. Call it an occupational hazard or part of the privilege of escorting God's people from cradle

to grave (I consider it the latter). We always say the Apostles' Creed, and I always get a little louder for the line, “I believe in ... the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” There's the hope, and thus the joy. Take that, death.

In Lesson 4, we found that it is possible to be joyful even in suffering. How about in the face of death — can joy and mourning co-exist? For the Christian, the answer is “yes, absolutely yes,” because we know that death is not the end. Death is a conquered enemy, and the risen Lord Jesus uses it to deliver us out of this dying world to His eternal kingdom.

The end is not the end! The Lord will return to raise up and gather all of His people. That day will be a day of indescribable joy. For now, in grief, joy may be in the form of hope and waiting to be unleashed. But the hope of the righteous brings joy.

Let's take a look.

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1. Read 1 Thess. 4:9–12. This may seem like a strange place to start: what does it have to do with the end of the world and the hope of heaven? (Hint: remember Lesson 3 and check out a similar situation in MARK 13:9–13.)

As 1 Thessalonians 4 gears up for news about the Last Day, it starts with every day. The Thessalonian Christians are to go about their daily lives and callings; and as we discussed in Lesson 3, there is much joy to be found in our daily lives and callings! Jesus makes a similar connection in Mark 13:32–37, a parable about His return in glory: when the master returns, he looks to find his servants doing what he has given them to do.

Read 1 Thess. 4:13–14.

2. What is the obstacle to joy in verse 13, and why does hope (and potential joy) remain, anyway? What is the joy about Jesus in verse 14, and what is the joy about those who have died in the faith — what does Paul call death in these verses?

The obstacle to joy in verse 13 is grief in the face of death. For those who mourn unbelievers, there is no hope; however, those who mourn the death of believers, there is hope! There's hope because Christ has died and Christ is risen from the dead. Because He is raised, His people are not dead and gone, but only asleep.

3. Is there comfort in Christ for Christians who are given to mourn the death of unbelievers? Even if they cannot grieve with hope for the one who has died, what sort of hope might they still have?

This is a very sensitive question, and the answer is perhaps best acted out than spoken by Christians. When it is given us to mourn an unbeliever who has died, we cannot change what God says about faith in Christ being necessary for salvation. However, we can still look forward to — and hope for — the day of resurrection, when our sorrow will be no more, and we will no longer

be tempted to accuse God of being unfair. In the meantime, the comfort in Christ for such mourners can be their church family, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who accompany them in their grief and assure them that they are not forsaken by God or His people.

4. Read 1 Thess. 4:15–17. There are all sorts of reasons for joy in these verses about the Last Day. For instance, what joy might you find in the following phrases:

a. “This we declare to you by a word from the Lord.”

This isn't vain speculation, a fond wish or a maybe: this is the Word of God, and God always keeps His Word. For many today, “hope” signifies nothing more than an iffy or improbable wish, as in, “I hope it turns out OK,” “I hope the Mariners win the World Series,” etc. For Christians, the resurrection is not wishful thinking, but a certainty that is guaranteed by the Lord's own promise.

b. “We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord.”

The joy here is another promise kept by God: the Church will remain until the end of the world, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Given the hostility of the devil, world and sinful flesh against the Lord and His people (just look at what Christians have suffered in history!), it's truly miraculous that the Church remains. That miracle will continue until the Last Day.

c. “Those who have fallen asleep.”

Once again, those who die in Christ are called “asleep,” a joyful reminder that they will be raised again on the Last Day.

d. “The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.”

The Lord Himself comes again! He does not leave this to angels, even though they will accompany Him (MARK 13:26–27). Christ Himself returns to deliver His people to everlasting life. Furthermore, He does so with authority: thus the

cry of command, the archangel's voice and the trumpet. At His incarnation, He came meekly and allowed Himself to be beaten and crucified at the hands of sinners. On the Last Day, He comes in glory and power.

(Note: this passage, especially vv. 16–17, is often used out of context in support of the false doctrine of “the Rapture,” the teaching that Christ will return furtively to take Christians to heaven before great troubles that signal the end of the world. As the cry, voice and trumpet indicate, there is nothing hidden about this arrival, nor is it sometime before the end: this is Jesus’ triumphant return on the Last Day.)

e. “The dead in Christ will rise first.”

There is a resurrection of the dead! The faith of Christians is not in vain (1 COR. 15:14)!

f. “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

Talk about a joyful end of grief: we are caught up together with all those who have died in the Lord. Here, we have a life of saying goodbyes to those who die in the faith before us, and — unless the Lord returns soon — saying our own goodbyes before our own sleep of death. Then, suddenly, we will be together, reunited with all the saints of God. Hope will be evident, overflowing joy!

g. “And so we will always be with the Lord.”

Always! The resurrection is the beginning of everlasting life. *Everlasting life.*

Stick a bookmark in 1 Thessalonians 4, and let's check out this multitude from another angle — when they have arrived in heaven! Read Rev. 7:9–17.

5. How are they described in verse 9? Are there reasons to rejoice here?

Among other things, this crowd is countless in number and from all around the world. The Lord has kept His promise and saved people of all nations. (If He only chose certain nations, you

could never be sure you were included.) They are standing before the Lamb on His throne, the same Christ who just appeared in glory to take them to heaven. They are clothed in white robes, because they have been washed, pure and holy, in the blood of Christ.

6. The crowd is waving palm branches in verse 9; and in verse 10 they declare, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” We came across another crowd with palms and shouts in Matt. 21:6–9 during our study on worship in Lesson 2. The crowds of Matthew 21 and Revelation 7 have some common themes with your congregation here and now: can you identify the joyful parallels?

In Matthew 21, we saw the Palm Sunday crowds wave palms as they shouted, “Hosanna,” or “Save now!” as well as “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They shouted these joyful greetings because the Savior was present with them. In Revelation 7, the crowd waves palms again because the joy is the same, except it is fulfilled: rather than shout, “Save now!” they shout, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” As Christ was in their presence in Matthew 21, now they stand in His presence in Revelation 7. You live between Matthew 21 and Revelation 7. As you await the resurrection, your joy is the same: Jesus is present with you. In His Means of Grace, He is present to bring the salvation He has won on the cross for you, so that you might be one whose robe is washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

7. How are the people described in Rev. 7:14?

More joy! They have come out of the great tribulation, delivered from this sinful world to everlasting life. Furthermore, they are in heaven because of the blood of the Lamb, because of Christ's sacrifice. It is not dependent on their works, but His sacrifice and grace.

8. Read verses 16–17, as well as in Rev. 21:4. What isn't found in this multitude?

In Rev. 7:16–17, there is no hunger, thirst, scorching heat or tears. Tears are absent in

Rev. 21:4, too. So is death, mourning, crying and pain. These are all former things that have passed away.

9. Think about friends and loved ones who have died in the faith: what do these verses say about them? Be personal about this: for instance, I think of my father-in-law, a pious believer who died after years of immobility and loss of speech due to Parkinson's. In that multitude in Revelation, he can stand, even leap for joy; and his voice is among those who shout, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" After seeing him in various stages of that wretched, relentless disease, I can't help but rejoice for him now. Who do you think of?

Answers will vary.

10. Think about your own health. Perhaps you have some chronic pain, nagging injuries, mental illness, etc. What does the resurrection mean for you?

Answers will vary, but none of the wages of sin are allowed in heaven! The Lord will raise up His people perfect and holy.

11. Think about what it means for you and that fellow congregational member that, try as you might, you just can't get along with. What joy does the resurrection promise?

That congregational member will be delivered from whatever sins made them difficult to get along with. You will also be delivered from whatever sins make you difficult to get along with!

12. Think about what this means for those who mourn. What joy does the resurrection promise?

In heaven there is no more mourning and no more tears, and that's quite a thing to ponder when crushed by grief. We will rejoice to be reunited with those who have died in the faith. And as we touched on briefly before, we will also be delivered from mourning all death: as hard as it is to imagine, mourning will simply be no more.

Now, back to 1 Thessalonians!

First Thessalonians 4:18 and 5:11 both instruct, "Therefore encourage one another." In between (5:1–10), we're told how to live in anticipation of the Last Day, no matter when it appears.

13. Read 1 Thess. 5:1–10. How are unbelievers described? How are believers described? What do these descriptions mean?

Unbelievers are described as "of the night and darkness" (vv. 4–5), asleep (v. 6), drunk (v. 7) and destined for wrath (v. 9). The imagery vividly depicts those who do not believe in Christ and are unconcerned about judgment.

Believers are described as "children of light" and "children of the day" (v. 5); awake and sober (6); clothed in faith, love and the hope of salvation (v. 8), and destined to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 9), who died for us.

14. Given these descriptions, what will life be like in the world until the Lord suddenly returns?

There will always be tension between the world and the church, a marked difference between believers who await the end with hope and joy, in contrast to unbelievers who do not.

15. First Thessalonians 5:12–15 counsel Christians how to live together in a congregation in these last days. What are the main points?

Christians should show proper respect to those who labor in the church (vv. 12–13) — the text is in reference to pastors who preach the Word. They are to live at peace among themselves (v. 13), to love one another (v. 14) and to serve rather than seek revenge (v. 15).

In this quick look at 1 Thess. 4:13–5:15, we've heard a stunning description of the Lord's return on the Last Day, what we face as Christians in the world until then, and a description of how we are to live together and love one another. As we join the saints in praying, "Come quickly, Lord!" we do so in hope and joyful anticipation because Christ is coming back.

In the meantime we keep receiving the Lord's gifts in His Means of Grace, keep going about our callings,

and yes, we endure suffering. How does Paul counsel us to live in the next three verses?

Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
(1 THESS. 5:16–18)

16. The warmup for Lesson 1 asked you to reflect upon this text. How would you explain those verses now?

Answers will vary, but here are some ideas: We can rejoice always because we always have the joy that we are redeemed by Christ who is coming again. We pray without ceasing, knowing that the Lord will hear our prayers and answer them as long as we are in this fallen world. We give thanks in all circumstances because, this is the will of God for us in Christ Jesus; and if it is in Christ Jesus, then the God is using all circumstances for our good.

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For some more concluding words, see “A Parting Thought” after this lesson; but before you go:

Rejoice! From this lesson or from the past few days, make a quick list of specific reasons to rejoice in the hope of heaven. It might be relief from affliction, the anticipation of being with Christ and those who have died in the faith, etc.

Give thanks! Reflecting upon God’s promises, give thanks for His promises that bring you comfort and joy now. Remembering friends and loved ones who have died in the faith, give thanks to God for His faithfulness to them.

Pray! Including the thanks and the causes for rejoicing you’ve just listed, ask the Lord for help to live as Christians until the Lord returns. Close with the Lord’s Prayer.

Sing! I’ve always got a soft spot for “For All the Saints,” (LSB 677), remembering the faithful departed and smiling at the line, “we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.” Another underrated hymn that reflects the now and the not yet is “Oh, How Blest Are They” (LSB 679).

A Parting Thought

*Weeping may tarry for the night, but
joy comes with the morning.*

(Ps. 30:5)

I'll be honest. Some days, I'm not feeling the joy.

There's a lot in life that will sap your energy and rob you of joy, after all. Throw in some grief, some stress and a trial or two, and a feeling of joy is hard to come by.

But here's the thing: we walk by faith, not by sight (2 COR. 5:7). By faith, we know that where Christ is, there is joy.

That's why I'm going to maintain that to be fully Lutheran is to be joyfully Lutheran. As we've highlighted five different aspects of our faith and life, there are some distinctions in our doctrine that should fill our lives with extra joy: there are some differences, perhaps subtle, from other Christians, that give us a joyful advantage.

Take lesson one, that true joys are found where Christ is. I have friends who believe in Jesus, but tend to live out their faith practically as if He has done His part on the cross, and now it's up to them to maintain their life and joy until He returns. According to Scripture, though, Jesus is far more involved in our daily lives — I often compare Him to a bridegroom visiting his bride to ensure her wellbeing until the wedding day arrives (REV. 19:7). Our lives of daily repentance are lives of joy, knowing that Jesus constantly attends us to forgive our sins and be our strength.

Or take lesson 2, in which we looked at joyful worship. You have this supreme joy that you know exactly where and when Christ visits you — in His Word and Sacraments. Rather than rely on feelings or try to decode circumstances around you to discern God's favor, you can say things like, "I know that the Lord just visited and forgave me, because He gave me His body and blood!" That's still a certainty on the worst of days. Many believers lack the certainty provided by the Means of Grace.

Consider lesson 3, where we looked at vocation. I have a few Christian friends who are worried that they're not doing enough for Jesus because their daily responsibilities "get in the way," and thus they're nervous that they're disappointing the Lord. In the Lutheran doctrine of vocation, according to God's Word your daily responsibilities *are* what you do for Jesus. He delights in what you do!

As we mentioned in lesson 4, it's always tempting to believe that suffering means we don't have enough faith, and I have encountered those who believe this to be true. As one of the terrible consequences, they believe that God is the farthest away when they are suffering and need Him most. How different, and more joyful, for you: even in the worst of trials, the Lord is as near — with grace and help — as His Word and His Supper.

Finally, all Christians look to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, and to seeing the risen Jesus in His glory. You have this additional comfort that many do not: you know the truth that, though you do not yet see Jesus, He is present with you in His Means of Grace until that Last Day.

Sum it up and behold your life in Christ! Set free from sin, you go about your daily life with the certainty that God favors you and delights in your callings. You live with the certainty that you're forgiven, that Christ is as near as His Means of Grace, that heaven is yours if the world ends before this sentence does. In a world of darkness, you're walking around like you're going to live forever — because in Christ, you are! All this is cause for joy, and you're only getting started, because weeping remains for the night, and joy comes in the morning. When the Last Day dawns, all sorrow and suffering will be former things that have passed away. Ah, but joy? There will always be much rejoicing in heaven.

All Christians share this joy to one extent or another, but I would maintain that this joy is no more apparent than in what we believe as Lutherans, built upon the Word of God.

Thus I will say once again: let us be fully Lutheran, for then we will be joyfully Lutheran.

— [Pastor Tim Pauls](#)

