

Farewell

Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

There are two ways of making a cake. One way, you take a box of cake mix, dump it into a bowl, add water and an egg, mix not too much, bake it, and you've got a cake. It's pretty hard to mess up. The second way is to start from scratch--to measure out each ingredient, and add it at the proper time. There are many things that can go wrong, and many scratch cakes fail, because somewhere along the line, directions were not followed exactly. There was a little bit too much flour, not quite enough sugar, not stirred right, you forgot to take the eggs out of their shells--who knows. Baking a cake can result in failure if we do not follow the orderly instructions that lead to a high, moist cake. The same thing holds true when we build something--whether it's a skyscraper or a model toy. Certain things have to be done first before we can continue with other steps. Many a family has spent a frustrating Christmas day because Dad was having a hard time finding the patience or time to put together the Christmas toys and gifts. Sometimes, frustration results when we are too impatient to follow directions, or if we do them out of order.

It's best to do things in order. We have to put first things first. How many times have you heard from this pulpit--that something is not right in our lives, because we are not putting first things first? We are not so anxious to put God first, and God's ways first. What we need to do is to put our heads and hearts in order--so that we know what we are doing, and where we are going.

It's not too hard to discover what we need. We listen to God's word to find out. It tells us what we should be doing. It tells us what we need most. And since most of us here this morning are members of a church, we can also ask: what does the church need most?

If we took a poll right now, and asked everybody to write down just one thing this church needs most, we would get a variety of answers.

#1. The church certainly needs workers. It needs full-time workers. There are more than 600 empty pulpits in our churches this morning.

#2. The church needs people. The LCMS does not make babies! Much of the work of Christ's church here and in other places never gets done because there are not enough committed people. People are sometimes ready to join, but often they are not ready to join in.

#3. The church needs prayer. Churches that grow are churches where pastor and people are praying for each other. The church even needs money to carry out its ministry plans. It needs all of these things and more. But most important of all, the church needs a message. And the message that is needed, the message that people need to hear over and over again, is the message of the Gospel. It is not a difficult thing to understand. We even say we can put it in a nutshell, and we call it John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

That same message is found in our text: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. The precious Gospel message is found in that beautiful passage. All three persons of the Trinity are found busily at work. God offers hope for us. The son works it out for us. And the Holy Spirit brings it home to us--he makes it possible for us to believe and accept the fact of our salvation. When we hear this Gospel, we can have hope. And we need hope. Christians are the only people in the world who know what hope really is. When a whole bunch of Christians get together, like in this congregation, there should be a great deal of hope. A church without hope is literally a hopeless church. A hopeless church should do itself a favor, and close its doors and shut down.

We said before that doing things in order was very important. God gives us the important order in our text, the passage I begin many sermons with. God

first offers hope. He is the God of hope. We were in a miserable situation. We were swimming in sin, either enjoying every minute of it, or suffering in it, certain to die, and certain to suffer in hell eternally because of it. God then steps in and offers us hope. He offers us one last chance in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ had to suffer and die to make it all possible, and he did, so that we could have hope. When we believe in Jesus Christ, when we accept his suffering and death as payment for our sins--when we accept him as a savior and Lord, something happens. Our lives are changed. God's instructions for our lives cause our lives to turn out much better than we could have hoped for.

Paul tells us that when we believe, we not only receive eternal life with God in heaven, but we get a lot of throw ins. Because we believe, we can have joy. Joy is that feeling that comes with knowing that somebody cares. That somebody is no less than the almighty God of the universe. Some of you have never experienced the joy of working for your Lord along side of your fellow believers.. You may be here to worship, and there is joy involved with that. But you're missing out on a lot more joy, that can be discovered only in service.

But joy is not to be confused with fun. We can have joy without having fun. Often faithful and tireless workers become discouraged because they feel abandoned by their fellow members. So few have to do so much. It can remove some of the fun, but don't ever let it remove the joy. Joy comes with seeing a task accomplished to the glory of God. Don't stop plugging away, because you might miss out on the joy that God is ready to bless you with.

Because we believe, we have peace. Peace comes with knowing that we are acceptable to God the Father because of what his Son has done for us. It's the peace which the world doesn't know diddly-squat about, and if it knew what it was, it couldn't give it.

The church needs a message, and it has the Gospel, which tells everyone who hears it that God offers hope, that believing in Jesus is the way, and that joy and peace will follow All this talk about

what we need reminds me of a fellow who was trying to tell God what he needed. The fellow was Paul, the same man who reminded us that WE should have hope. Paul had some kind of problem which he called his thorn in the flesh. And just as we might expect, one of Christ's apostles took it to God in prayer. Three times he took it to God in prayer. Imagine--one of the apostles asked God three times for mercy, and what was God's answer?

God said to Paul, "Paul my grace is what you need. You don't need to get rid of your thorn in the flesh. As a matter of fact, it looks good on you, and because the power of the almighty God sticks out big time when you see what a weakling you are--when you see how little it takes to bring you to your knees. And Paul--when the Holy Spirit brought you to faith in Christ, you got my grace--you got exactly what you really needed. How many times have we gone to God, telling him what we thought WE needed?"

I can just imagine God's answer: My child, my grace is what you need. You only think you need more money. You only think you need better health. You only think you need more sleep. You only think you need more or less responsibility. You only think you need success. What you really need is my grace--and I have offered it to you through Jesus Christ.

Others believe that what this church needs is more time--too much to do in so little time. We can't reach the people we want to in the time we have. I can hear God saying: Listen here, family of faith. My grace is what you need. You think you need a lot of things, but let me tell you--one by one--you need only my grace, and you have it. And all of you together, You all need my grace. My son did not die for a few of you--He died for all of you. You all have my grace-- my undeserved kindness through Jesus Christ. People who know and feel the grace of God, people who have hope--the hope that comes with believing--their lives are filled with joy and peace. The results? Open wallets and checkbooks, volunteer help, and people who are willing and even excited to do the work of Christ's church. If we have experienced the grace of God, there will be no insurmountable problems with money, help, or time.

As together we look back over its history, we can see that this congregation has enjoyed the grace of God. It has been able to do much by the grace of God. But as we together look back, we also admit that what we have NOT done shows our weaknesses. How much more COULD we have done if God's people had acted more like God's people, and opened their hearts and lives, and put the work of Christ's kingdom first?

We hang our heads in repentance. But God speaks again: Saints of Bethlehem Lutheran Church: your weakness just magnifies my strength. When we see how weak and inefficient we are, we should praise God all the more for his wisdom, power, and majesty.

Have you ever wondered what is the future of the Holy Christian Church? And what is the future of Zion Lutheran Church? I'm not a fortune teller, and I have no inside information, but I believe that the future of this church is bright. That's not based on community growth statistics or cultural trends. I believe the future of this church is bright because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed here. The future of this church is bright because this church has a message. It has what it needs to succeed in winning souls for Christ and his kingdom. When the word of God is taught here, it works. The Holy Spirit will use every worship service, every Bible study, every Sunday School class, every VBS to work faith and grow faith in the hearts of people. He will use His Word to strengthen the faith of weak believers. He will season and mature the faith of strong believers. The Word of God will not be preached in this building and merely bounce around from wall to wall, without entering the ears and hearts of people. What the numbers are--they are not important. It is only faith in the hearts of believers that God has ever counted for anything at all. Men may try to choke the church, others may be satisfied to let it suffer from malnutrition, but the church of God will be around long after its attackers have met their own destruction.

But we don't want our church to merely drag itself along. If it is to be a lively, energetic, spirit-filled church, it will take people. It will take people because God has designed his church to work

through people -- rather than angels, or animals, or stones, or plants. It will take people who have hope. It will take people who are firm believers. It will take people who have experienced the joy that comes with believing. It will take people who have experienced the peace that comes with believing. It will take people who are dedicated to their Lord Jesus Christ, who know the Gospel and who are eager and willing to spread the Good News he brings. You are not losing an interim pastor. You are really sending one on assignment on a different mission field.

Once when the children of Israel were afraid that God was backing out on them, they pleaded with Samuel, their leader, to pray for them. He said: "The Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve him faithfully with all your heart."

Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you. And my prayer for you will continue to be: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. Amen.

Philip Tesch
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North Highlands, California

From God, through Paul, to You

Ephesians (6:10-24)

And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong.

So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials.

And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way.

This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours.

This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet.

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life.

God's word is an indispensable weapon.

In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare.

Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters.

Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

And don't forget to pray for me. Pray that I'll know what to say

and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all, the message that I am responsible for getting out....

Good-bye friends. Love mixed with faith be yours from God the Father and from the Master, Jesus Christ.

Pure grace, and nothing but grace, be with all who love our Master, Jesus Christ.