

MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER

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Series theme: A Summer in Rome

Text: Romans 5:1-11 (Rejoice in the Lord Always)

No tour of Rome would be complete without a visit to the Pantheon. Originally built by the Roman consul Marcus Agrippa in 27 BC, the massive domed structure remains a “must see” destination for modern day tourists.

The dome itself is 43 meters in diameter and stretches 43 meters from the floor to the top. It is supported by brick and concrete walls that measure twenty feet thick, and when it was built it was the largest structure of its kind in the world. **The hole in the top of the dome, called the oculus, is open to the sky. And some people say the dome is so high that rain evaporates before it hits the floor.**

Today the Pantheon serves as a Roman Catholic church (the Church of St. Mary and all Martyrs), but this was not always the case. True to the meaning of its name, “all gods,” the Pantheon was originally built to honor the gods and goddesses of Roman mythology.

You are probably familiar with some of the more prominent gods (names like Jupiter, Juno, Apollo and Venus), but the Romans recognized a host of lesser deities as well. Roman religion was built on a foundation of ritual and ceremony, and about one day out of every four was set apart for the worship of the gods.

On the surface the Romans were a very religious people, but that was the problem. It was all on the surface. No one actually believed in the gods, at least not anyone who claimed to be educated. The religious skepticism of the day culminated in the poetry of Lucretius, who declared that faith in the gods had been the curse of the human race.

This was the spiritual atmosphere that surrounded the Christians who lived in Rome, people who regularly passed by the Pantheon, people who found themselves surrounded by gods in a godless society. As worshippers of the one true God, they were mocked. They were ridiculed. They were persecuted. So what was this small band of believers to do?

Would you believe “rejoice?” I’m not kidding. I’m actually borrowing from the inspired words of the apostle Paul. And his words of encouragement for first century Christians are no less meaningful for us, for twenty-first century Christians trying to find our way in a skeptical, secular world. No matter how tough things are, no matter how difficult the situation appears to be, children of God always have reason to rejoice...

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

I. Rejoice in the hope that is yours by faith

II. Rejoice in the God who gives you that hope

In the opening verse of our text, Paul establishes the basis for our joy: **“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1)**. In Paul’s day when a judge would hear a court case and issue a verdict, he would declare the defendant either guilty or “justified.” If you were justified, that meant you were innocent. Or to be more precise, you were declared not guilty.

God our righteous judge has in effect declared us “not guilty” of our sin. We are pure and innocent in the eyes of God, whose judgments can never be appealed. Because we are not guilty, we have peace with God. Like all law-abiding citizens, we are free to live peaceful and quiet lives.

But the peace that we now enjoy didn’t become ours because we were innocent or because we retained high-priced lawyers who spoke in our defense. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith in Jesus we have gained access into God’s grace.

At one of my summer jobs, I worked in a restricted access laboratory. Whenever I went to work I had to use a special access card to enter the building. Without that card there was no way I could get in. I could push and pull on the heavy steel doors all I wanted, but it was impossible to get past security.

In a way, Jesus is our access card. He gives us access to God. Through faith in Jesus, God smiles on us and opens the door to the realm of his grace. Therefore we rejoice. We rejoice because we have access to God by faith, but we also rejoice in our hope for the future.

Christianity is not a this-world religion. Life is only the journey. The final destination is heaven. And our future hope is not just a wish or a dream or maybe a 50/50 proposition. Because of Jesus we can be absolutely 100% certain that we will live forever in heaven.

This is what makes Christian hope unique. Our hope allows us to rejoice at all times, even when things aren’t going so well. Paul explains: **“We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (3,4)**.

It’s not difficult to be happy about having peace with God, to be happy about living under God’s grace, to be happy about the prospect of eternal life in heaven. But suffering? Can we really rejoice when we are suffering?

If nothing ever goes wrong in your life, you might be tempted to think that you don’t really need God. After all, what good is God if everything is going well without God? God allows troubles to come into our lives because he loves us. God allows the people he loves to suffer to strengthen us. God allows us to experience heartaches and headaches to draw us closer to his side.

Suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character. This word for character is the same Greek word used for the refining of metals. Precious metals were put under intense heat to test their purity, and whatever was impure was burned off in the process.

In a similar way God tests us. Sometimes he allows us to sit on the “hot seat.” His purpose is to purify us, to strengthen us. And the ultimate goal of the whole character building process is to magnify and fortify and solidify our hope for the future.

Because our salvation is an accomplished fact, we can rejoice at all times, even when we are suffering. We can rejoice even when the doctor says that the prognosis is not good. We can rejoice even when we are struggling to make ends meet. We can rejoice even when our beliefs come under attack. We can rejoice in spite of our earthly sufferings because of the hope we have for the future.

How can we be so sure? How do we know that we won't be disappointed? Because God has given us proof. Because God has poured out his love into our hearts. Because God has given us the Holy Spirit. This is why our hearts overflow with joy today. This is why we have reason to rejoice every day. We rejoice in the hope that is ours by faith, and we rejoice in the God who gives us our hope.

When the Lord formed Adam and breathed life into his body, He didn't intend for Adam to ever stop breathing. Death is unnatural. Death is a consequence of sin. According to Paul death is an enemy. And we don't like to think about it. We don't want to talk about it. People spend billions of dollars on surgeries and procedures and pills to prolong their lives.

Still there are those rare occasions when a person might be willing to give up his life: **“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die” (7).**

Imagine that you are a soldier in Iraq. You are in a bunker taking shelter from the flying bullets overhead. Suddenly a grenade comes over the top and lands only a few feet away. Before you have any time to react, your friend jumps on it and absorbs the impact of the explosion, giving up his life for you in the process.

That could happen. I imagine that it has happened. If it happened to me, I would be grateful. And I would use words like brave or heroic or courageous to describe my friend because he made the ultimate sacrifice.

Now I want you to imagine the same scenario, except this time I want you to replace your friend with an enemy soldier. This time your enemy is the one who jumps on the grenade and dies to save your life. We might call his actions unbelievable or maybe even crazy because no person in his right mind would give up his life for his enemy.

As much as that kind of sacrifice defies human logic, it happened. It happened two thousand years ago on a hill outside of Jerusalem. We were God's enemies. We were powerless. We were

hopeless. We deserved to die for our sins. But instead of destroying us, **“Christ died for the ungodly” (6). “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (8).**

Jesus’ death has removed the guilt of our sin. Jesus has removed the barrier that separates us from God. Sin is no longer our Master, and God is no longer our Enemy. He is our Father and our Friend.

As wonderful as it is to know that, as much as we appreciate that, we also know that the best is yet to come. **“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him” (9)!** At the risk of oversimplification, this is the gist of what Paul is saying: “Jesus has already done all of the heavy lifting. The rest is easy.”

Jesus suffered and died. Jesus defeated death and the devil. Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. Jesus has done it all, and he has promised that He will come again. On the Last Day we will see Jesus as he descends from the clouds. And when he does, we will have nothing to fear.

We don’t have to be afraid because forgiveness is ours. We don’t have to be afraid because salvation is ours. We don’t have to be afraid because our Judge is also our Savior. And our Savior God has replaced the fear in our hearts with joy.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This popular saying is another way of saying that it is a good idea to adopt the actions and attitudes of the people around you. In certain situations this can be good advice, but not today.

Instead of encouraging the Roman Christians to embrace the religious skepticism of Roman society, Paul’s advice for them, and his encouragement for us is this: “When in Rome, rejoice.” Rejoice because God sent his Son to die for your sins. Rejoice because an eternal inheritance is waiting for you in heaven. Rejoice even in the midst of sufferings. Rejoice in the hope that is yours by faith. And rejoice in the God who gives you that hope. Amen.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, you are the giver of all that is good. You fill our lives with peace and hope and joy. When sin and suffering threaten to rob us of our joy, remind us of the saving work of your Son Jesus. In his arms we have peace. In his Word we find hope. In his forgiveness we rejoice, today and always. Amen.