



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

February 2021

The Joy of the Lord is your Strength

An elder once said, “When the Spirit of God descends upon a man and overshadows him with the fullness of His outpouring, then his soul overflows with a joy not to be described, for the Holy Spirit turns to joy whatever He touches. The kingdom of heaven is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Rejoice always! The apostle so many times driven by the Holy Spirit commands us to rejoice. He tells us be anxious for nothing, rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. God has commanded the children of Israel to always rejoice at the feast days before the Lord; always to be Joyful in the sight of the Lord. We have to serve God with joy and rejoicing. If it happened that a great king tells us that he would like to meet with us because he wants to elevate us, wants to give us his wealth, wants us to be called one of his own how are we going to meet him? Would we be gloomy, depressed, sad, and angry? Of course not. How much more our beloved, the King of kings the Maker of the whole world has called us His sons, gave His life on our behalf, granted us eternal life that never perishes? Shouldn’t we then be joyful when we are serving God and praising Him? St. John Chrysostom says, “Prayer is the place of refuge for every worry, a foundation for cheerfulness, a source of constant happiness, a protection against sadness.”

The apostles understood this type of joy very well and they took it a further step. They rejoiced when they were beaten because they were considered worthy to be beaten for the sake of His holy name. St. Pachomius one time, as he was collecting firewood a thorn went into his foot, so instead of complaining he would meditate on the thorn of sin and on the Lord’s sufferings; and as he would meditate, he would pray for long time with tears and would forget to take the thorn out of his foot. St. James the apostle tells us to count it all joy when you fall into various trials. (James 1:2). Sometimes,

we complain when a trial befalls us, we are always so quick to defend and to be angry and to lose our Joy. If we count it all joy when we fall into various temptations, we give birth to joy, and we offer that joy in sacrifice to God¹

St. John the Short was talking one time about bearing insults with joy. He said the following story. The elder wanted to teach his disciple humility. So, he told him anytime you are dishonored or cursed give money to that person for three years. The young monk did what his elder told him when he finally learned the lesson. So, it happened that the young monk traveled to Greece and there had been by the gate of the city philosopher that used to curse every person going in the city. So, when the monk had passed by him, he was cursed, and the monk rejoiced and was happy and smiled. The philosopher looked confused and told the monk, I am cursing you and you are happy?! The monk replied saying, I used to give money for whoever used to curse me for three years, and now I found one that does it for free without me giving him money. Am I not ought to rejoice? St. John the short continues saying, this is the gate of the city of God; and our fathers by enduring humiliation and reproaches entered through it with joy.² Sometimes our egos and pride stand in the way of our joy, but the great elder showed him how to overcome himself and his pride. If we are truly humble, we would rejoice in everything that befalls us.

Because we have a beloved Father that cares for us, we ought to rejoice in all the trials because it is like a jeweler refining gold. He is removing all the impurities out of it. It is the same thing when we are faced with trials; God is refining us so that we may become light to the world so that they see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

The refining process is painful now. No chastising seems it to be a joyful for the present time, but painful. Nevertheless, afterwards, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. St. Isaac the Syrian says, “A good heart joyously sheds tears in prayer. Voluntary and steadfast endurance of injustice purifies the heart. Patient endurance of injustice springs from disdain for the world; and a man endures calumny cheerfully because his heart has begun to behold the truth. Joy arising from voluntary endurance of calumny and injustice exalts the heart. They for whom the world is dead submit to contumelies with joy.”³ Also, another thing that can make us rejoice is hope, but on the other hand despair and despondency takes our joy away. St. Macarius the Great tells us about rejoicing in hope by

¹ Bray, G. (Ed.). (2000). *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude* (p. 5). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² Paradise of the fathers Arabic Vol I, PP. 530,531

³ Saint Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 5, P. 165

saying, "This is the sign of Christianity. However, how much man should do and how many justifying works he should perform, he should feel that he has accomplished nothing. And when he fasts, he should say, "I have not fasted." When he prays, let him think, "I have not prayed." Persevering in prayer he should say, "I have not persevered. I have only begun to practice asceticism and to labor." And even if he is righteous before God, he must say: "I am not righteous. I am not working, but I begin each day." He ought every day to have the hope and joy and confidence in the future kingdom and in redemption and say: "If today I have not been delivered, tomorrow I will be." It is like the man who plants a vineyard. Before he ever begins work, he entertains hope and joy as he ponders in his mind the vineyards and counts up his profits, even though there is no wine yet. And in this way, he puts himself to work. Hope and expectation make him toil enthusiastically and for some time even he undergoes great expenses, paid out of his pocket. It is like one who builds a house or cultivates a field. At first, he undergoes expenses to himself, but in the hope of future profits. It is the same way in this matter. Unless a person keeps before his eyes joy and hope, namely, "I shall obtain salvation and life," he cannot bear patiently afflictions or the burden or accept to travel along the narrow road. For it is the presence of hope and joy that allow him to labor and bear afflictions and the burden of traveling along the narrow path."⁴

One of the stories in the desert fathers tells us of a certain monk that used to fall in a sin daily and he used to pray to our beloved saying, "My Lord you know my sorrows and my hardships. Please deliver me whether I want or not, for I am like my mire. My Lord if You only save the Saints that's not surprising, for they deserve it, but with me show me Your great mercy, for I am not worthy. There happened one day as he was praying, the devil was agitated by his great hope. So, the devil appeared to him and told him are you not ashamed to stand in the presence of God and call upon His name? The monk told him you make me fall into sin and I ask our merciful God to have mercy upon me and I will contend with you in this manner till I die and I will not lose hope in my God and we shall see who will win you or the mercy of God. The devil told him, "From this time forth I will no longer war against to you anymore, lest you obtain a crown because of your hope".

"Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer."
(Romans 12:12)

⁴ Pseudo-Macarius The Fifty Spiritual Homilies And The Great Letter (Paulist Press), Homily 26, PP. 167,168.

St. Paul tells us to rejoice in hope. So, beloved, let us never lose hope because that's the plan of the devil to steal our joy. Another thing that can take away our joy is when we delay our repentance, since sin entered into the world through the envy of the devil. But when God created man, He said, "*Let us make man in our own image and our likeness.*" So, when we sin and delay our repentance, we lose our joy. St. John Chrysostom says about rejoicing, it is not separable from grief. For indeed, it is rather deeply connected with grief. The one who grieves for his own wrongdoing and confesses it, is joyful. Alternatively, it is possible to grieve for one's own sins but rejoice in Christ⁵. In the book of proverbs, it says, "*My son, give me your heart.*" So, we can also attain joy by receiving our Lord in our houses which is our hearts, and when we have the King of peace in our hearts, we will have joy and peace in our hearts. St. Paul says to the Romans, "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:35-39) See, none of these tribulations can take away our joy for we have inside of us the Lord of lords and the King of kings. When our Lord was speaking to his disciples about how their sorrow will turn into joy, He told them, "*Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore, you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.*" (John 16:20-22) So, also in our struggles, we have sorrows. Just as when a woman is in labor it is painful, so also spiritual labor is painful. Our sorrows will turn into joy if we believe in the power of resurrection. We have complete faith in resurrection and as Christ rose from the dead, so we shall also be raised. Turning away from sin to righteousness, from darkness to light, from death to life, "*How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that*

⁵ Edwards, M. J. (Ed.). (1999). [*Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*](#) (p. 281). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:2-4)

So also, when we are united to Christ, we have joy, through repentance and communion. But when we separate ourselves from Christ, that’s when we lose our joy because separation from our Lord is union with death. For whoever commits sin is slave to sin. But on the other hand, when we are united to Christ by partaking of the all Holy Body and blood, we are united to the giver of life. So, what kind of inexpressible joy is this to become united with the giver of life? Our lord is creating everything new when he says, *“Behold I make all things new; all old things have passed away.”*

Isaiah the prophet says, *“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, And her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, Nor the voice of crying.” (Isaiah 65:17-19)* Joy according to the world is death, but to us our joy is in *“whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy” (Phi 4:8).*

The world understands weeping and trials as bad or even evil, but not to us as Christians. Our Lord told us *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:4,10-12)* Our Lord not just calls us blessed when we are suffering but he commands us to rejoice and not just to rejoice but to be exceedingly glad for our reward is great in heaven. St. Peter also reminds us also to *“rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:6-9).*

True repentance gives holy and pure joy although we might be weeping over our sins, just as Psalmist said, *“Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him.”* (Psalms 126:5-6). Also, the word of God is our source of joy *“I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure.”* (Psalms 119:162), *“Your words were found, and I ate them, And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; For I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.”* (Jeremiah 15:16) The more we spend reading the word of God, the more we have joy in our hearts. Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Joy is the daughter of love and the mother of peace and its grandchildren are longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Let us shout with Habakkuk saying, *“Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls—Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.”* (Habakkuk 3:17-19)