

Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Those words come from Philippians 4:4. In that context, “rejoice” is about more than just being happy. In fact, Christian joy is an attitude that we can have even when we’re overwhelmed with sadness. “Rejoicing in the Lord” means finding the goodness of God to be the greatest thing. It means having a source of unbreakable comfort in God’s love for us.

“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” is a hymn all about directing our joy toward the greatest acts of love that God has done for every believer. Even though it talks about God’s big-picture works in history, it shows them to us in an extremely personal and individual way. The hymn describes the struggle and despair of a person who feels the tremendous weight of his or her own sins and discovers God’s salvation in the gospel.

After a general call in the first stanza to rejoice and proclaim God’s goodness together as his people, the second stanza takes us directly to the heart of a lost sinner in a terrible place. It is the place that every sinner begins life: a prisoner to Satan, tormented by sin and the impending reality of death. “In sin,” the hymn says, “my mother bore me.” This concept is often called “original sin.” Adam and Eve’s first sin separated them and their descendants from God. Sin and Satan have a death grip on us from the moment we’re conceived.

And no matter what the sinner tries, he or she is unable to escape. “My own good works availed me naught,” the hymn says—they did no good. They earn nothing in God’s eyes, no “merit.” They can’t outweigh the wrong things that we have done. When we were unbelievers, our “will”—our mind’s ability to choose things—was not God’s ally. It fought against him. “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to his law, nor can it do so” (Romans 8:7). As the sinner comes to realize this, he or she is brought to the point of despair. God’s punishment for sin is hell.

But God does not leave sinful people hopeless and helpless. From before the foundation of the world, the hymn tells us, God created a plan of salvation to rescue sinners. Filled with love and compassion, God chose to act as a Father to us.

It cost him, as the fourth stanza points out, “his dearest treasure.” Jesus was the “bright jewel” of his Father’s crown. But God gave him for us. The fifth stanza imagines the message of John 3:16 as a conversation between the Father and the Son, as the Father sent the Son he loves to die for us.

The Son obeyed. The sixth stanza shows us a small picture of what that meant for Jesus. He came in a lowly way, wearing no “garb of pomp

or power”—nothing that would look royal or mighty. Instead, the hymn says, he bore “a servant’s form like mine.” Jesus’ way of defeating the devil and his power over us was to become like us in every way.

Starting in the seventh stanza, Jesus starts speaking to the despairing sinner. These stanzas are full of some of the greatest promises that the Bible contains: Jesus is our refuge; he is our ransom—his blood buys us back for God. He fights for us, and nothing can separate us from him. He is our friend, and we belong to him. Jesus died to the power of sin, but his sufferings were for our good. In his resurrection, life overpowered death and guaranteed us that we will live forever with Jesus.

The ninth and tenth stanzas describe the promises and instructions Jesus gave the disciples to comfort and guide us after his ascension. First, we hear about Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit. At the Last Supper, Jesus called the Holy Spirit “another comforter” and said that he would guide Jesus’ followers “into all the truth” (John 14:16, 16:13).

Then, we hear Jesus’ command that his disciples stay true to his teaching. This leads us to an ending command that might feel a bit abrupt: “Take care that no one’s man-made laws should e’er destroy the gospel’s cause.”

Even though these words don’t come directly from one of Jesus’ sayings, they’re here for a very good reason. This hymn is all about the things that God has given to us in the gospel. One of the biggest threats to the gospel comes when people make up their own rules about what we need to do to be “real” Christians instead of focusing on what Jesus has already done for us. This warning reminds us of an important truth: the gospel is something we need to cling to, and repeat, and treasure.

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“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” was written by the Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546). In many ways, the hymn mirrors his personal experience. In his youth, Luther was bothered by the weight of his sins. He tried to find ways to quiet his conscience through good works. The discovery of the gospel changed his life, and he devoted many of his years to fighting man-made laws that confused the gospel.

At the same time, Luther clearly intended the hymn to speak to every Christian, and the message closely matches the powerful words of Romans 7 and 8. “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” was probably the second hymn that Luther wrote, perhaps as early as 1523. It seems to have been first written for use as a kind of “folk song” to be sung in daily life rather than as part of formal worship.