

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

What are your expectations as Christians? What kind of life do you expect? The easy life? Filled with comfort and tranquility? Where you can say to yourself, as two weeks ago we heard the rich fool say to himself: *“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry”*? Is that the message of the Bible? That you expect your pastor to proclaim to you?

Surely, that’s what many people yearn for ... a message of declaring promises over your life so that you can become a better you. Keys to maximizing your success and accelerating your dreams. Telling you that if only you think better, you will live better. That a victorious life begins with your mind. People flock to this blather and read the self-help books that promote it.

But listen to what the *“LORD of hosts”* told Jeremiah about the prophets of prosperity of his day: *“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”* *“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart.”*

Perhaps it was this kind of preaching that moved the infamous Karl Marx to call religion *“the opium of the people.”* For Marx, an atheist but with some Lutheran roots, a person’s religion functioned like opium for a sick or injured person: it reduced his immediate suffering and provided him with pleasant illusions which gave him the strength to carry on (Wikipedia, *“Opium of the people”*). In particular, Christianity is a mind-numbing narcotic that dulls the senses and sensibilities of its adherents.

But surely Marx’s was a skewed view of Christianity, a theology of glory that did not take into account suffering and cross. He was confusing wheat for straw. God’s word is not about unrealistic, pleasant illusions. It is a hard word of reality, that includes suffering, trial, and tribulation. His word is *“like fire”* that consumes, *“and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces.”* Far from being a narcotic pain reliever, God’s word tells us that suffering makes us stronger. It’s a fire that refines us. God said through the prophet Isaiah: *“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction”* (Isa. 48:10). And St. Paul taught: *“we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does*

not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

This is the true theology, Luther says — or more properly, this is the true theologian ... a theologian of the cross. "He deserves to be called a theologian ... who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and cross" — Christ's suffering ... "[I]t is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross." "[T]rue theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ ..." (*Luthers Works*, 31:52-53); and through the lens of Christ's suffering, our own. Consider the writer to the Hebrews again: "*Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ... [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*" (Heb. 12:3, 10-11).

That's what Hebrews 11's great litany of the saints of old shows us: the life of God's faithful is filled with troubles. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph all experienced suffering and trial. Moses, the great deliverer of Israel, began life under threat of death, and again later as an adult, he had to flee from Pharaoh when his life was in danger. Israel endured many trials in their 40 year wilderness wanderings. The faithful experienced torture, mockery, flogging, chains, imprisonment, stonings, being sawed in two, being killed by the sword. They were "*destitute, afflicted, mistreated.*" This is the reality of the faith; Scripture does not present us with mind-numbing pleasant illusions.

Marx and the world today don't get this. I was listening to a podcast the other day where a prominent person was telling of his suffering as a father dealing with his son's life-threatening illness. He said, "it strengthened our family, my wife and I [sic]. And even my faith" The interviewer seemed dumbfounded: "Why would that strengthen your faith? It doesn't seem like an obvious response. If you ... you grew up Catholic, like you go to Catholic schools, and then the tough, really the toughest thing that can ever happen to a man happens to you. And so why wouldn't you say, 'well, you know, God has abandoned me. There is no God. This is too horrible'"? (From The Tucker Carlson Show: Sen. Eric Schmitt: FBI and DOJ Corruption, and How Politicized Judges Are Undermining America, Aug 13, 2025).

The answer is because of Christ's suffering and cross. Jesus Himself endured unimaginable hostilities, enduring cross and death, despising the shame of this unjust execution, doing it all for us, for our eternal joy. That was the "*fire*" Jesus came to "*cast ... on the earth.*" That was the "*baptism*" He would "*be baptized*

with,” not for an earthly peace, not for an earthly life of ease, but for our eternal salvation, as Jesus Himself said: *“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”*

And strife, even in families: *“from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”* I’ve witnessed such division, even here at Zion. It’s heart-rending.

Jesus came, not to give peace on earth, but peace with God, as St. Paul describes it: Jesus *“was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”* (Rom. 4:25). We are saved when we, like Abraham and the people of old, believe His promise. St. Paul continues, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand”* (Rom. 5:1-2).

This is the peace that we are to proclaim: not a false peace on earth, good will toward men — illusions, dreams, and lies — but *“on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased”* (Luke 2:14), that is, peace for those who are recipients of His grace and who trust in Him. Hear that message in more of the Lord’s word, *“I have said these things to you, that in me — that is, joined to Jesus by Holy Baptism ... that in me, that is, abiding in Jesus by His word ... that in me, that is, partaking of Jesus’ body offered up for you, and drinking His blood shed for you ... that in me — you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33).

Dear friends, the Christian religion is no narcotic meant to dull Christians’ senses to the suffering and cross that afflict us. Nor is it a proclamation of a false peace on earth, with a life of ease and tranquility. Christianity is ultimately a realistic proclamation of our lives as Christian soldiers fighting against this world and its prince, against the sin which clings so closely to us. Armed with this knowledge, and built up in our faith through suffering, we steel ourselves against the assaults of our flesh and ready ourselves for battle against our enemies.

Yes, our Christian religion is a reminder that as we hold onto Christ, proclaim His cross, and trust His word, we will endure fire; there will be divisions on earth — in many of our relationships; but in Christ, we live in the peace that passes all earthly understanding, and living in that peace, God will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto everlasting life (Phil. 4:7). God grant that to us ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.