

Blessed Lord, You put down the mighty from their seats and exalt those of low degree: Save us, we beseech You, from pride and vainglory, from self-seeking and false ambition. - Grant us Your Spirit to work in us, hearts that know and acknowledge Your mercies, and withdraw not Your hand from us. Do not remember our ingratitude and unworthiness, but remember the grace You have promised to sinners in Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 123; Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, p.254 Ps. 106*)

[T]here arose on that day [of Stephen's stoning] a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

In Christ Jesus, who with joy is proclaimed by His Church even when under severe adversity for His name's sake, dear fellow redeemed:

It is easy to understand the gratitude of the one Samaritan leper in our Gospel lesson, but we are left to speculate at the ingratitude of the other nine Jewish lepers. It is very possible that these nine ingrates suffered as those who with great pride considered that they did not deserve such a horrible disease and even blamed God for it.

When we read in our text about the severe persecution of the Church in Jerusalem, causing many Christians to flee their homes, we do not find them becoming embittered against the Lord, in whose name they now were made to suffer. Rather we see their grateful responses toward God and their new neighbors. What we therefore shall consider and apply to ourselves is this truth: **Out of Deserved Adversity Comes Thankful Joy.** [*Now we hear the word "adversity" from sports figures today, but that is not how we are using it. It has been cheapened by even referring to objectionable calls by refs as adversity!*]

I

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to assist the Apostles, who were becoming increasingly involved in the daily needs of the Church, which took the Apostles away from preaching and teaching the Word of Christ. The qualities of these seven were described as: "men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Stephen

proved himself very capable in this regard. When some of the enemies of the Gospel in Jerusalem disputed with Stephen they were frustrated because “they could not withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which he was speaking.” So false charges were brought against him accusing him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” against the temple, the law and customs of the Jews.

Standing before the High Priest, required to give a defense of himself, Stephen reviewed Israel’s history and called to repentance his Lord’s enemies, who were now breathing out threats against him. His dying words while being stoned were a prayer: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Saul, or as we often know him today, the Apostle Paul, while still an unbelieving Pharisee, was present at and giving approval of Stephen’s execution. Based on the *“success”* of Stephen’s execution a great persecution against Christians commenced with Saul at the lead.

Stephen was not wasting his breath on making appeals for his innocence protesting the injustice, even cursing God, but instead was joyfully and gratefully proclaiming the Gospel of forgiveness in the name of the very one for whom he was now dying. Was Stephen an innocent sufferer? Well, he was innocent of the false charges made against him to justify his stoning. But he was not innocent in his own person. He was as much a sinner as you are today. This life of misery and pain, of hate and injustice, is as much a result of his sin as it is of yours and mine and even his enemies.

The adversity we all experience is well deserved by us all. Just as leprosy was deserved by all ten of the lepers whom Jesus healed. But we know it is not an easy admission to make on our part that we deserve any and all adversity. You might remember Jacob facing great adversity as he returned to Canaan where his brother Esau still resided. In his prayer the night before meeting his brother after 20 years of separation, he approached God with his request for safety with these humble words of gratitude: “I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that You have shown to Your servant.”

II

However, we all need to admit that we have behaved ourselves as the nine ingrate lepers at times, when we have every reason like the one leper, like Stephen or like Jacob to recognize that all the suffering and adversity we experience in this life is well deserved. You, I and all sinners deserve not just this temporary life of difficulties, but we deserve everlasting suffering. Understanding and acknowledging this expands our gratitude toward our ever-merciful

Lord God, who through His Son has spared us from what we all deserve everlastingly.

Philip, was one of the seven like Stephen who was chosen to assist the Apostles. He was forced to flee the persecution and found himself in Samaria. He was not among the displaced chipping his teeth against those who were hunting him down for confessing the name of Jesus. Instead we are told he willingly and joyfully proclaimed Christ among these Samaritans.

It would be hard to believe that Philip was among the Samaritans without them knowing what brought him to their area. But as he in the name of Christ was able to do these signs “unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed”, they received the message of the universal Savior of all sinners, Jesus Christ.

There was a long history of hostility by the Jews toward Samaritans, but here is one from Judea among them blessing them with the message of forgiveness, life and salvation. “So there was much joy in that city.” They could have rejected the message, which Philip brought, by objecting to the ill treatment they had received by his ancestors and even current countrymen. Instead they were led to the point of confessing their sins and faith in Jesus as Savior, so that out of their deserved adversity came an eternally grateful joy.

God has worked this same joyous spirit in you my fellow redeemed sinners. You know you deserve to be cast away from God your Creator on account of your many sins. But you also know and believe you are forgiven, even for your many words and deeds of ingratitude. In all of your unworthiness, God has reconciled Himself to you through the sacrifice of His holy Son upon the cross.

We have entered another heated political environment again these days in preparation for the 2020 presidential race. Politicians will vie for your support with their many promises to improve life for all citizens. If elected and he/she is able to deliver on promises that improve life for many we would consider this to be a success. But when politicians promise a utopia, in which all injustices and adversities disappear, we as Christians know better.

There is a place where there is no more pain and suffering, no more tears or mourning. It is real and is promised to us by our Lord for Christ's sake. But for now we live in this reality as Jesus told us: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” All we deserve on account of our sin has been overcome by our Lord. Jesus' suffering and death in your place has

truly overcome the everlasting impact of the adversity you deserve on account of your sin. Your suffering now cannot be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in the courts of heaven awaiting you.

Trust the word of Jesus in the Beatitudes, which Stephen may have had on his heart and mind as the stones started to be thrown at him: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven." Live under all your present and future adversities humbly in grateful joy now and forevermore for Jesus' sake. Amen.