

Joy in the Testings and Blessings 07.17.11

Bible Reading: James 1:2-12 NIV (Read by Jana)

Sure, I'm joyful in the blessings... but in the testings? Joy. It's something we all know when we experience it. It's the most wonderful experience, the greatest comfort, the source of delight, the result of great fortune. When we look up "joy" in the dictionary, we find the following synonyms: beatitude, blessing, bliss, felicity, gladness, happiness, warm fuzzies. When we look up the opposites of "joy" we find: calamity, ill-being, misery, sadness, unhappiness, wretchedness. This would seem to be a problem for us Christ-followers when we come to James 1, because we are to:

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds."
James 1:2 NIV*

Now I don't know about you, but I REALLY struggle with this. I'm to consider it pure joy when I face trials? When things don't go my way? When I'm struggling with the very opposites of joy: calamity and ill-being? When my best friend stabs me in the back and I'm left not only without my friend but also this feeling of overwhelming betrayal? Joy? Or when I work really hard to qualify for a job, then find out it goes to someone else. Joy? Or when my daughter is sick and I don't know what to do to help her. Joy? Or when I lose someone I love most dearly. Joy?

Today and over the next several weeks, I'd like to talk to you about what the Bible teaches us about how we respond to trials and difficulties... about what joy really is (and isn't). And how we - as Christians - should handle the "misery, sadness and wretchedness" of life with JOY!

The key word is **CONSIDER**. *"Count it all joy..." James 1:2 ESV*

I like how the ESV and other versions use the word "count" when it comes to joy, because there is a certain calculation that must occur in our minds in order for us to connect the trials of life with joy. It helps us to understand if we look at how this same word is used in other places in the Bible.

* When Paul is making plans for the Corinthians' offering he uses this same word in the instructions. He says "I thought it necessary to..."

"Go on ahead and arrange in advance..." 2 Cor. 9:5

We see here the preliminary thinking and planning... the *leading or governing thought* necessary to come to the right conclusion. Joy is the same thing. It is a *leading or governing* thought.

* We also see this same word in Paul's great letter to the Philippians in 2 places. First in how Jesus thought about his position to God:

"[Jesus] did not count equality with God ..." Phil. 2:6

...and how Paul viewed his own previous righteous life as a Pharisee:

"Whatever gain I had I counted as loss." Phil. 3:7

* We see it again in Paul's letters to Thessalonica. First in how he wanted them to think about their leaders and preachers:

"Esteem them very highly in love." 1 Thess. 5:13

In other words, this was a choice, a point of view, a decision in advance of how to regard their leaders. Also in how they were to view people who did not follow Paul's advice. Separate but...

"Do not regard him as an enemy..." 2 Thess. 3:15

What we learn from all of this is that joy is something we think about ahead of time. It's an attitude, a decision, a point of view, a choice!

I must CHOOSE joy; it is not:

- **AUTOMATIC**, it's an attitude! This is one of the first things we must note about joy in the Christian sense. If we always think about joy being an automatic response to the blessings of life, about when things go our way - then we'll always struggle with this Christian sense of joy in the difficult trials of life.
- **EASY**, it's often a challenge! Because it's not automatic, because it is a choice, it's not always the easy choice. Sometimes it's a downright challenge. "I WILL BE Joyful" in the midst of tears and/or negative emotions. For that reason the Christian joy is not...
- **A FEELING**, it's a decision! So often we run our lives on how we feel. We allow our emotions to govern our decisions. I should be the opposite for a Christ-follower. Understand you cannot always control how you feel. You will feel sad. You will feel betrayed. You will feel hurt. You will feel lonely. But you choose, you make a decision to be joyful - in spite of your feelings.
- **DEPENDENT ON CIRCUMSTANCES**, it comes from God! None of the above would make any sense at all if it weren't for this final part. Joy could not be joy if we felt nothing but negative feelings in the midst of it. But true Christian joy is an experience derived NOT from our circumstances - good or bad - but from God:

"The joy of the Lord is your strength." Nehemiah 8:10b ESV

"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation." Habakkuk 3:17-18 ESV

All kinds of trials... All JOY... James could not be more clear in his use of two words: "All kinds of trials" and "pure / all" joy. Do you see the connection? It doesn't matter what you're going through:

DIFFICULTIES, HARDSHIPS - all of them we can experience joy.

TEMPTATIONS - This word for trials is used in other places as temptations. If you have a particular temptation you struggle with this is a cause for joy! We'll see why in a moment.

CHALLENGES, DISCIPLINES - Sometimes it's a matter of going through things that toughen you up. A cause for joy!

FROM GOD, SELF-IMPOSED, OTHERS - This means that the source could be from God. But not always. Sometimes, because He loves us, he puts us in difficult circumstances so we learn discipline, so we learn how to handle things. But not always. Sometimes we can CHOOSE our own discipline - our own exercise of spirituality to grow in the Lord faster. Sometimes it because of what others do to us - not our choice or God's. But God will use it as an opportunity for growth. And that's joyful for us!

LONELINESS, BETRAYALS - Feeling alone can be one of the hardest things we face. Especially true when we're betrayed. We feel like we can never trust again. This gives us the opportunity to

find our company in God, to not be alone because of His presence, to trust in God rather than in people. A cause for joy!

FAILURES, SETBACKS - Our plans go bad. We fail at something we were sure would succeed. We don't get the raise, the promotion, the job. Our business doesn't grow. Another chance to trust God, another opportunity for joy.

TRIBULATIONS, ACCUSATIONS - Many of these trials are common to everyone, including Christians. But sometimes we can suffer JUST BECAUSE we are a Christ-follower! And the Bible is clear - this is a great cause of joy!

ILLNESS, DEATH - Christians are not immune from either - for ourselves or those most loved by us. Again the Bible teaches that in illness and even in death we can discover great joy!

Way too often we just leave it here. Be joyful! We quote Jesus and Paul and James and tell ourselves to do it no matter what. Then we follow a kind-of positive mental attitude, a pump-me-up, a determined face-off with the mirror in the morning: "I will be joyful, I will be joyful," as if somehow we could convince ourselves that surely we must be joyful despite how lousy we feel.

This is actually destructive! Because we change the very core meaning of joyful - of having a blessed experience of well being - when the very foundations of our life are crumbling about us! I'd like to take the rest of this evening and then next weekend to talk about the HOWs and the WHYs of experiencing joy in the midst of the various trials we face in life.

To start with, remember that this CONSIDER or COUNT is a mindful decision. It requires thinking along with experience. Knowing WHY you should be joyful goes a long way toward deciding HOW to be joyful in the midst of difficulties. There are 5 reasons, we learn from James, about WHY we should be joyful. We'll cover the 1st and last today, then take a concentrated look at the middle 3 next weekend. There's also two significant obstacles to experiencing joy - each of which we'll examine on July 31st and August 7th.

5 Reasons Why the Testing of My Faith is Joyful

1. So that I may **KNOW MY FAITH IS AUTHENTIC**.

When the trials of life come - and remember they come to all - both Christian and non-Christian alike - the Christian has within him the ability to respond differently because of Christ within him. The Spirit of God makes a difference to us - not in the experience of trials, but in the response to it. When we see and experience this difference, we know that something has changed, that we are changed - and in this we rejoice. This was a fundamental teaching of Jesus:

"The seeds that fell on rocky ground stand for those who receive the message gladly as soon as they hear it. But it does not sink deep into them, and they don't last long. So when trouble or persecution comes because of the message, they give up at once." Matthew 13:20-21 GNT

If you are a Christ-follower - you've received the message of Jesus' love for you gladly - and then trouble or persecution comes - and YOU DON'T QUIT - you know your faith is authentic. A great cause of joy!

This is why Peter writes that we should be diligent - why we work at our faith - why we greatly desire our faith to take deep root into our lives:

“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure.” 2 Peter 1:10a ESV

How this deep-rooting, faith-producing, doubt-overcoming, persevering, maturing, completing, equipping work takes place... will be the subject of our talk next week (and the fill-ins for #2, #3, and #4).

But let me give you a preview by giving you the surprising answer to #5:

5. So that I may **BE BLESSED**.

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God promised to those who love him.”

James 1:12 NIV

There is GREAT BLESSING and GREAT JOY that comes from knowing that we have withstood the test, that we are authentic, that we are Christ-followers, that he loves us and that we are his! There is great joy that comes in the midst of trials and hardships, when we know that no matter what we have lost, we have gained the love of our Heavenly Father. When we recognize this blessing, it is not hard to decide to be joyful.

This is why Jesus began his most memorable sermon - the Sermon on the Mount - with what we affectionately now name the beatitudes - in other words, the blessings. And yet these blessings are not like any normal blessing you would think of:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit...
- Blessed are those who mourn...
- Blessed are those who are persecuted...
- Blessed are you when others revile you... and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...

Sometimes it takes the tears of life to know we need God's healing.
Sometimes it takes the loneliness of life to know God's presence.
Sometimes it takes the hurts in life to know God's great comfort.

The greatest joy we can know comes when we learn that these trials - the rain, the storms, the hardest nights of our lives are really God's mercy in disguise.

Special Song: Christy Anne Pierce sings “Blessings” by Laura Story

Prayer & Benediction

So would you like to know HOW these trials of life turn into blessings? Want to know WHY these trials of life are so very important to you and to God? Want the answers to fill-ins 2, 3, and 4? For that you'll have to come back next Sunday evening!