

James 1:1-18, "Trials, Temptations, and Joy"

As we survey the cultural landscape today, one thing I am immediately confronted with is an extreme deficit of joy. Especially over the last two years, we seem more and more to be surrounded by sorrow, anxiety, grief, hatred even to one another. We are lacking, as a culture, joy.

One of the constant struggles of life for many people is to remain joyful. And there are many definitions of what "joy" is – certainly among a secular culture. It's no use going to a dictionary to measure what it means for each of us individually to be Biblically joyful. I don't think they do the word justice. Because it is intensely connected with some emotional state, there's a subjectiveness about the word that makes it difficult to categorize in terms of definition. But yet each of us, I believe, have a knowledge of what joy is, either by recent experience, or by the enduring want of it.

It's not merely temporary happiness. It cannot be reduced to pleasure. Measuring joy by accomplishment or success seems trite. But yet it does not exclude these either. I think there is something transcendent about the emotion that our we in our mundane world would be a little foolish to try to capture or articulate it. Having said that, I am going try to articulate it as an introduction, but hopefully we will have a truer understanding of true joy at the conclusion.

If you have known me for any time, you know I am particular about words and their history. Not simply as a hobby, but because I count it among the most important neighborly tasks to infer properly what another person implies – that is, to understand what someone is meaning to say when they say something. We all know the dangers of completely misunderstanding – of inferring incorrectly – what someone else is trying to communicate. Churches have split because of it – and I mean in a big way.

In four weeks, we'll be celebrating the 504th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, after which Martin Luther was excommunicated for his doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, which so angered the Roman Catholic Church's official doctrine. Fast forward 480 years later in 1997, when the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" was issued by Roman Catholics and Lutherans. It's a complex and fascinating document, but a simple summary of it would be "I think we understand each other a little better now when we talk about justification." The official response of the Catholic church acknowledges the document, "represents a significant progress in mutual understanding and in the coming together in dialogue of the parties concerned; it shows that there are many points of convergence between the Catholic position and the Lutheran position on a question that has been for centuries so controversial."¹

¹ "RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO THE JOINT DECLARATION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION"

So it's important to me, as well, to do my best to understand not just what words James is saying, but what he – and through him, the Holy Spirit – is meaning for us to understand. I want my inference to match the Holy Spirit's implication.

So, it might be helpful to understand joy at the outset its opposite, especially as it is used in God's word. We find in John 16:20, 2 Corinthians 2:3 and Hebrews 12:11, for example, its use in direct contrast an opposition to the term sorrow or grief. The opposite word always connotes deep personal loss, very often with the permanent loss of death. So can "joy" then be associated in opposition with gain, even the permanent gain of eternal life? I think we're getting closer.

Before the word was "joy" in English it was "χαρά" in Greek. This may not be helpful for many of you, but it is related to the English word "charity," which originally was used as the English word for that highest form of Christian love, agape. It's no coincidence that love and joy are so closely associated with each other. We feel joy when loved and we rejoice in our own true love given. There's a transcendent sense of permanent gain when we feel the joy of pure love, just as there is a transcendent sense of permanent loss when we feel the grief of pure hatred.

Can we proceed then with a non-formulaic definition of pure joy as a transcendent experience of the blessings of God's love? Again, I'd hate to pin it down so denotatively, but that's very close to what James means when he introduces the whole book with the exhortation, "count it ALL joy when you fall into divers trials and temptations." And we'll see this idea of life and death, love and hatred, sorrow and joy played out throughout the book of James – not just in material ways, but in spiritual ways.

In James's introductory exhortation, we can't forget the greeting in verse 1. This exhortation was made to Christian Jews who had been persecuted – who, in many cases, had lost everything, including being disowned by their families. Surely they were grieving their loss, the hatred experienced from ones whom they loved. What a grief; what a sorrow. What trials they suffered, what temptation they must have faced to renounce their faith and return to sin!

And yet James snaps them out of this grief, commanding them to "count it all joy, my brothers – my family – when you are faced with the many trials you are suffering!" Your very faith is being tested, and for a good reason. It will produce for you a spiritual gain you cannot even imagine! If you endure in this testing, dear brothers, you will be made perfect and complete – lacking nothing! No sorrow, no grief, no loss, no hatred. Don't conclude at this point, dear Saints, what this perfection looks like. James will get there,

<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-justificazion/en1.html> (Retrieved September 30th, 2021).

but as an introduction he offers his grieving brothers the promise of pure joy out of enduring the suffering of trials and temptations.

Before we go any further, if you'll indulge one more quick conversation about words: In these verses, we're going to hear "testing" and "trials" and "temptations" and though there are subtle differences, they are all connected by this idea of "proving," as in proving a mathematical equation or structural integrity by means of testing it. If the test does not cause the subject to fail, it has been proven. If it fails, the subject was lacking.

So what is James warning are some things that could lack that could cause his audience to fail – that could cause us to fail – in the face of various trials.

The first is a lack of Wisdom, the second is a lack of Faith, the third is a lack of Humility

James was definitely a student of Wisdom Literature – in fact, his epistle is often classified as the sole "Wisdom Literature" book in the New Testament, hearkening back to the practical knowledge and archetypal figures found in the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. But it's also found in the law. In the section of the law we read last week, we heard God tell his people, Keep my commandments, "for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'"² Proverbs tells us that "the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." And James tells us that if you lack wisdom, ask of God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.

Brothers and sisters, it is hard to know what the right thing to do is in difficult circumstances. It is uncomfortable to stand publicly against godless philosophies and moral systems when they are affirmed by the dominant communications, entertainment, and education structures. It is painful to stand against blasphemy committed in the name of ideological preference. But wisdom does not just inform you of what the right thing to do is, it also gives you strength to do it. "Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city," says the Preacher.

So brothers, I would urge you to pray fervently for wisdom, that you may be wise and strong. But wisdom is also available from the word of God. Do not neglect the rich wisdom found throughout the statutes of the LORD.

James would also urge you not just to pray fervently for wisdom, but to ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

² Deut 4:6

A lack of faith is another point of failure – a way we may not be proven through the trials we face. This is not a simple exhortation to ask confidently, but to ask within your assurance that the LORD is your sovereign and good God.

I think we can all appreciate the temptation to doubt God's goodness, sovereignty, or even existence is great when in the face of trials. How could a good and sovereign God permit evil in this world? How could God allow suffering among so many children around the world? Is God imperfect in his holiness when my he permitted my childhood best friend to be buried alive at 10 years old? How could God let such things happen? Is that even the right question to ask? Can it be that God doesn't even exist? If he did, surely these trials would subside because I'm a good person!

Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters. Do not doubt. Have faith. God is. God ever was, ever is, and ever more shall be. God is not the problem in the face of trials. God is faithful. God is the definition of faithful.

Brothers and sisters, if God is faithful to his people, and we are made in the image of God, we also have this capacity for faithfulness. Do not doubt who your God is – remain true to your God. And when it gets hard, dear brothers, again return to the word of God. Faithfulness unto God comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ (Romans 10). When your confidence is shaken by trials, trust in your saving faith that has made you a child of God, and return to the Word of God for restoration. Without this confidence, in the face of trials, you will fail the test – you'll be no better than a wave, driven by the wind, vacillating from the shore back to the ocean, breaking and crashing on land, and dissipating back into the deep.

The third point of failure is if we lack humility. Just as wisdom can bolster your faith, your bolstered faith can increase your humility. Let the brother in humiliation boast in his exaltation, but let the rich boast in his humiliation. James is contrasting a couple of things in this verse, which the Greek construct helps to emphasize:

- 1) The poor, the humiliated one, has good reason to rejoice in his spiritual exaltation
- 2) The rich, the exalted one, has good reason to rejoice in his earthly humiliation.

Again, we see in this contrast, James's themes of sorrow and joy, and gain and loss, and remember he is writing to Christian Jews under persecution, dispersed from their homeland. Those who had lost everything on account of Christ are commanded to rejoice. Those who had much left to lose are similarly reminded their wealth is fleeting, and is deserving of humiliation in comparison to the spiritual riches in Christ.

The rich man – that is, the man whose glory is in his wealth, in his pursuits of wealth – will wilt away, he will decompose and return to dust. But again, for the believer, through this earthly humiliation, we return to the spiritual exaltation in the riches of Christ.

James's allusion here to Isaiah 40:8 is vivid. "The grass withers and the flower fades," and James was sure his audience knew what came next, and the comparison is obvious: Though riches decompose into humiliation, "the word of God stands forever." Saints of God, in your trials, remember your humility before the word of God, and do not lack it.

Pray for an abundance of these qualities – wisdom, faith, and humility – and seek them in the word of God given to us, so that you may withstand the proving furnace of these earthly trials. These will help you remain steadfast, to endure the struggles of this temporal life, and remind you that after all these struggles is the joy of eternal life with Christ – the crown of life – which the wise and faithful God has promised to you, and effected for you in his own humiliation, his sacrifice here on earth for you.

So let us move then from the testing – the proving – through trials and suffering and move to the temptations we face along with them. Basically what James is outlining here is we fall into sin by lacking in two significant areas:

- 1) Our lack of a proper theology
- 2) Our lack of a proper anthropology

If we lack a proper theology, we might rationalize our choice to sin by claiming the temptation to evil comes from God. Does God tempt a married man or woman with adultery? No, but have we heard an adulterous affair rationalized or justified by a claim that "this person has been sent by God to me!" I have personally heard these rationalizations, and perhaps you have, too. But God will not entice you to break his law, and if you knew God, you would know that.

Similarly, we succumb to temptation because we lack a proper understanding of ourselves. As much as we think we know ourselves, we forget constantly that we are not sovereign over our lives. The modern philosophies of the day will tell you there is no higher virtue than to "be your authentic self," and that way of thinking has even seeped into the modern professing church.

So-called preachers like Joel Osteen will say ridiculous things like: "Remember, what follows when you say "I Am" is going to come looking for you. If you will invite the right things into your life, the Creator of the universe will breathe in your direction. I believe and declare you will overcome every obstacle, defeat every enemy and you will become everything that God has created you to be."³

Don't you see? This understanding of man is one that so elevates the "self" that it can obligate God – the creator of the universe – to perform on your behalf, to breathe in your direction. Such a mindset will cause you even to invite greed, lust, and pride into

³ Joel Osteen, *The Power of I Am*, Speech uploaded Oct 29, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= kjSK-PcU9o>

your life, and count them as righteous desires because, after all, it brings satisfaction to the self.

Modern anthropology, descended from Immanuel Kant in the 18th Century, has continued to elevate man, even to the point where we may assume to be judges in our own case. It is an eternal principle of natural law and justice that "*nemo iudex in causa sua*," that is, "no one may be a judge in his own case." Yet modern humanity insists upon prosecuting, defending, and judging his own anthropology, and it's no surprise that the verdict is in his own favor.

But a proper anthropology does not come from ourselves. We require an outside judge. And the judge of the universe informs us our desires for the self, when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

There it is again: death. Loss. Sorrow. Grief. Your sin, o man, is the antithesis of joy!

But then! James once again contrasts the grief, loss, and death in sin with its opposite. We are reminded that in God, and in God alone, we have been given good things. These gifts, these blessings are from the faithful father, who is never driven and tossed like a wave, but in whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Now the language is interesting here in verses 17 and 18. It is very familial. It doesn't just speak of God as our father, and of ourselves as brothers, but implies to us in its language we are not just "brought forth," but he has in a way "birthed" us as his own. This birth, not from our own doing, mind you (as if any of our births are because of something we did...), but by the Word! The Word of Truth! What Christ has done has made us the offspring of God! Here the grief of death is contrasted with the joy of life in Christ.

And what is Christ! Christ is Wisdom personified. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1: God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being[d] might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in **Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God**, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."⁴

What else is Christ? Christ is the consummate object of our faith. The writer of Hebrews also encourages endurance and steadfastness, just as James does, saying, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God."⁵

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:30

⁵ Hebrews 12:2

There we see Christ also as one humiliated unto exaltation, just as we do in Philippians 2: Jesus emptied himself from on high, taking the form of a slave, born in the likeness of men – humbled himself by becoming obedient and submissive to the law – the law he created – even to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁶

So in this opening chapter of James, he is not just commanding his persecuted audience to seek Wisdom through prayer and the Word of God; he is not just commanding us to seek Faith through prayer and the Word of God; he is not just commanding us to seek humility through prayer and the Word of God! He is reminding us that the Word of God is Christ, and this is a reminder to pray in HIS name for Wisdom, for Faith, and for Humility.

We are born of God through the Word of Truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruit of God, looking unto Jesus – the consummate firstfruit – to help us through our trials and temptations.

Every good and perfect gift is a blessing of God, dear brothers, but God gave for us the consummate blessing. Let us look unto him as the author and finisher of our faith, the personified wisdom, the one humiliated that we might be exalted with him, who endured the struggles and temptations of life, and in whom we find our consummate joy – the transcendent and eternal gain experienced in the blessings of God's love.

BENEDICTION: ow to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25)

OUTLINE:

- Joy
- Trials
 - Failure 1: Lack of Wisdom
 - Failure 2: Lack of Faith
 - Failure 3: Lack of Humility
- Temptations:
 - Cause 1: Lack of theology
 - Cause 2: Lack of anthropology
- Joy:
 - Blessings from God
 - The Consummate Blessing - Christ

⁶ Philippians 2:6-9