

All Joy **James 1:2-4**

Intro

James writes this to particular believers in their particular circumstance as Jewish Christians in the Roman empire. The exhortation he gives, though, is a timeless one, one which “is always useful to believers, whose life is a constant warfare on earth” (Calvin). While James probably has persecution and other similar trials in mind, he identifies trials as those things which test a Christian’s faith. This makes a lot of sense of the ambiguity of “various trials.” James is not attempting to limit his call to joy in just a few circumstances.

Faith Testing

What is this testing of your faith? It is not God up in heaven as a divine trickster waiting to trip you up. Rather, He sees you as His precious treasure which He purchased at a high price (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The testing of your faith is like the purifying fire which produces pure gold (1 Pet. 1:6-7). But the analogy breaks down here at a very significant point. God does not set us in the fire alone. Rather, He is with us every step of the way (Matt. 28:20, John 14:16-17). Our God is the Good Shepherd who leads and walks with His sheep through every valley (Ps. 23).

Three Categories

There are three categories of trials that Christians undergo. (These are presented in no particular order. There is a lot of overlap, and this is probably not the only way to divide these things):

First, Christians suffer as a result of our own sin. These are the painful consequences and chastisements that are a direct result of specific sins that we have committed. God chastens His own because He loves them (Heb. 12:5-11). Sin has consequences, and God in His providence and mercy allows us to feel the sting of those consequences in order to train us to walk in His way and purify us so that it will go well with us. Do you count it joy to be under the Father’s loving correction?

The second category is the suffering we endure as a result of living in this fallen world. When sin entered the world, so did death, along with thistles, pain in childbirth, deadly tornadoes, cancer, rugburns, runny noses, and tyrants, to name a few. Often we experience trials and suffering in various forms and levels because we live in a world tainted by sin. But these too are from the hand of God and are not just the leftover consequences of Adam’s sin, as if God couldn’t stop them. “If there is calamity in a city [such as a virus or economic disaster], will not the Lord have done it?” (Amos 3:6; see also Lev. 14:34).

Third, Christians undergo trials due to their commitment to follow Christ. This can take the form of direct persecution: the “fiery trial” Peter speaks of in 1 Peter 4, the martyrdom of missionaries to unreached peoples, lawsuits against bakers refusing to glorify homosexual unions. It also takes the form of indirect persecution or suffering. An example of this might be sacrificing time and money and opportunities to raise children and give them a distinctly Christ-centered education. On the one hand, this should be our joy to do, but we should also

acknowledge that often these sacrifices are part of picking up our cross. Following Jesus is costly, but not only in the extreme form of martyrdom.

Ultimately, these various trials produce in us patience, “fortitude of mind in bearing evils” (Calvin). This is the wherewithal to hold on and fight through in joy, looking ahead in hope to the greater joy at the end of our race (Heb. 12:1-2).

Tailor-Made Testing

Enduring suffering and trials of various kinds is simply unavoidable in this life. God ordains various trials for various Christians. Your trials were made specifically for you to walk in. Your teenager is insolent and rude to you. Your father or mother is harsh towards you. Your boss is exacting and unforgiving in the midst of the lockdown. Your friend has betrayed you. You lied, and you now have to bear the effects of that sin. Your basement has flooded. You are diagnosed with cancer. You contract COVID-19. You are under the same roof all day, every day now with your spouse and kids, and temptations to anger and impatience and unkindness abound. You are mocked because you’ve decided to raise a passel of kids. You can’t hang out with your friends, and you are lonely. You’ve lost your job, or you are worried you are about to. You are violently allergic to certain foods. Your little daughter wakes you up multiple times every night. What is your trial? Where has it come from, ultimately? Who sent it? Do you see the testing of your faith right in front of you? Will you respond by counting it joy and trust in the Father who is tempting you? You might be tempted to think that you will rise to the occasion and count it all joy when some great trial of persecution comes, but the you curse and complain when mom asks you to do the dishes, or when your husband leaves his shoes in the living room again, or you get a headache.

This doesn’t mean that we are Stoics about our trials. No, rather, if we acknowledge Whom they come from, we know to Whom we should cry out. But part of that crying out, as we see throughout Scripture, is a cry that is set upon a foundation of joy in the Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength in the midst of every trial and testing.

Conclusion

No trial is outside of God’s control. We know this because the greatest test of faith, the greatest adversity a man has ever faced, happened when the Son of God was nailed upon the cross. Not only was it not outside God’s control, it was in fact key to His plan to bring His Son and many sons to glory (Acts 2:23, Matt. 26:39, Heb. 2:10). Jesus saw the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2). He saw the end goal, the perfect and completed work. Therefore, He endured the pain and shame of the cross, bore the sins of the world, so that He might obtain the world—so that He might obtain you. With Jesus as the one who has gone before you, you too can count your trials joy, whatever their size or intensity or length. You can count it all joy.

This makes no sense unless you actually believe that Jesus died for you and has been risen from the dead. So believe this, and then count it all joy when you encounter various trials.