

The Joy of the Lord

Text:

James 1:1-8

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him 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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Introduction:

Last week we began a study of this text. We saw first of all that it contains a vision of the Christian life that is expressed in a chain of propositions which we summarized in the following fashion:

- As believers we should rejoice in trials
- Because trials teach us endurance
- And only endurance can perfects us and prepare us for our ultimate destiny

The second thing that we established was that this teaching is not unique to James, but that we find it all through the New Testament; that it seems to be the universal teaching of the New Testament. This is the way early Christians, who were often subjected to severe testing, and even persecution, because of their faith in Christ, understood the trials that they were undergoing.

Finally, we saw that in order to correctly understand this idea we must be clear about what James and the other New Testament writers mean by the four key terms of the argument: “joy”, “trials”, “endurance”, and “perfection”. It would be relatively easy to misunderstand any of the four, and that misunderstanding could skew our understanding of how the Bible would have us understand our trials and cause us to misinterpret the events of our lives.

Since this is a subject that touches every believer, we will do well to examine each of these terms carefully. We will take them in the order in which they occur. We begin with joy. We will first try to clarify what it is not, then we will try to understand what it is, and finally we will ask ourselves if it can be lost.

I. What Joy is not

Joy, from a biblical perspective, must not be confused with pleasure. If it were then it would make no sense to rejoice in our trials, because trials by nature are not pleasurable. The confusion of the two would only lead us to believe that something is terribly awry in the line of reasoning that James and the other New Testament writers follow. This is emphasized in the text we read last week in I Peter 1:6-7: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Peter makes it clear that the trial itself causes grief. It is not that the trial, in and of itself, is pleasurable that causes joy, but the assurance that the trial has a purpose; that it is for our good that enables us to have a joy that runs deeper than our grief. This is what enables us to maintain courage and not lose hope in the midst of the trial. We would be wrong to suppose that we can smile through our trials and never experience the pain of our sufferings. We experience it fully, but beneath the pain is the "hope of the glory of God", and the "joy of salvation". These things are constants. If we keep our trials in proper perspective, they never go away. A hymn writer expressed it in these words:

"There's a peace in my heart that the world never gave,

A peace it cannot take away.

Tho' the trials of life may surround like a cloud,

I've a peace that has come there to stay." (Mrs. Will L. Murphy, "Constantly Abiding")

We can even take this idea a step further and say that obtaining joy often involves giving up the immediate pleasure. This is demonstrated in what Hebrews 11 says about Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

Like Moses, if we are looking to our ultimate reward, we will often forgo the immediate pleasure; choosing, as the writer of Hebrews says later, to join Christ outside the camp bearing his reproach (Hebrews 13:13).

II. What it is

If joy is not pleasure, what is it? The first and most important thing we can say about it is that it is not something that we can procure on our own. It is a gift. It is given by God. It belongs to the realm of grace. We may procure pleasure, but pleasure is fleeting and often disappoints. Joy is given and never disappoints. It often takes us by surprise. Joy, from a biblical perspective, must be qualified. It is the “joy of the Lord”, or the “joy of salvation”, or the joy of the Holy Spirit.” The biblical passage that best helps us understand this is what Jesus said to his disciples and to us on the night that he was betrayed and arrested. In John 15:13 he says: “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and *that* your joy might be full.” Later in 16:22-24 he says:

“And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give *it* you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.”

Here he assures us that the joy we will experience is his joy, that he gives it to us as a gift, and that the world cannot take it from us, and finally that we experience it as we live in communion with him. The “these thing I have spoken unto you” of 15:11 apply specifically to what he has just said about the vine and the branches. It is as we abide in him and he abides in us that we bear fruit, and bring glory to God, and experience his joy.

III. Can Joy be Lost?

This leads us to one last consideration. If joy is God’s gift, can it be lost? In the absolute sense the answer is probably “no”, but in a practical sense the answer would seem to be “yes’. Otherwise, there would be no joyless Christians. Since this does not seem to be the case, what must we do to maintain the reality of the joy that God has bequeathed to us in Jesus Christ? Let me answer the question by telling a simple story.

In the summer of 1987 my family and I spent the month of July in the south of France. I was filling in for a friend, who was pastor of the Baptist Church in the city of Draguignan, so he could direct a camp.

My duties included directing the Sunday morning worship, and conducting a Bible study and prayer meeting on Tuesday evenings. The Tuesday evening meeting was held in the home of an elderly couple, instead of at the church. The husband had physical incapacities that prevented him from leaving his home, but he still enjoyed gathering with other Christians, so we would meet at his home to give him that opportunity. His wife was especially vivacious and joyful for her age, and did not seem overly exercised by the burden of caring for her invalid husband.

One Sunday morning I preached from the part of Jesus' farewell discourse in the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel that I just referred to. I especially emphasized verse 11 that I just quoted where he tells his disciples: "These things have I spoken unto you that my joy might be in you, and that your joy might be full". I sought to explain that joy comes from staying connected to Christ, and not from the circumstances of our lives.

The next Tuesday, when I arrived at the home of Mme. Dieudonné, she thanked me for what I had said in the sermon, and then offered to tell me a story. I accepted her offer, and she related the following account.

When she was a young lady, she recounted, she had been in Geneva for a youth conference. Ruben Saillens, who was at that time the uncontested leader of the French Evangelical Protestants, was one of the participants. As she was sitting on a bench beside Lake Geneva one evening, he approached her. He shared with her a very short sermon that, she told me, she had never forgotten. He pointed to a bare light bulb in a string of lights over her head that had burned out, and said: "See that light bulb; it's lost its joy. Don't you ever lose your joy."

She then told me that she had never forgotten what he said, and that she had tried all her life not to lose her joy. It was a simple story, and I probably would have forgotten it, had it not been that her own deep sense of contentment, in spite of her less than ideal circumstances, so underlined the truth of what she had said.

Her story illustrates what I have been trying to say about Christian joy. First it shows that its source is external to the person experiencing it. Jesus said it is "my joy". He said that it comes from "abiding" in him. Paul called it a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Joy, from a Christian perspective, is a delight in life that runs deeper than the experiences of life. It endures in the good times and the bad, because it comes from neither,

but is a gift of God. As sure as a light bulb has no light in itself, but draws its light from the electric current to which it is connected, the Christian experiences divine joy by abiding in Christ.

The second idea that stands out in the story is that joy can be lost. We lose it when we forget its origin, disconnect ourselves from its source, and think that we can find it elsewhere than in Christ.

C. Davis writes: "From a psychological perspective one cannot experience joy while being preoccupied with one's own security, pleasure, or self-interest. Freedom from inhibitions comes when one is caught up in something great enough to give meaning and purpose to all of life and to every relationship. God alone is the only adequate center for human existence, and he alone can enable us to experience life with joyous spontaneity and relate to others with love".

Jesus stated it this way: "He who loses his life will find it".