

Count What All Joy?!

James

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Bible Text: Philippians 2:12-18; James 1:1-18
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I'd like us to begin a study this day in the book of James, and in particular focus our attention on verses 2 to 4 of the first chapter.

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Well, we have already, in the course of our time together, reflected that we know not what 2024 has in store for us. We may have our hopes, we may have our expectations, and we pray that the Lord be pleased to bless us, even in the midst of a wicked and depraved generation, and yet we don't know, perhaps by the end of the coming year, when we assemble at the end of 2024, we will come as those whose hearts are filled with rejoicing for all that the Lord has done in us and through us, but perhaps we will come to the end of the year and just bless the Lord that we have made it through the year, and hope that such a year will not be repeated in our experience. The truth is we don't know, nor are we meant to know such things, yet that does not prevent us from sincerely wishing each and every one of our neighbors, friends, especially members of our own family, those whom we hold dearest, we wish them every blessing for the new year, and hesitate not to do so.

Well, I trust that you will have a wonderful year in 2024, and that when you assemble at the close of the next year, if the Lord should spare us, that you'll do so with much rejoicing in the Lord's favor that has been made known to you and to your families, and yet there is that Eeyore, and I think the Scots possibly do that Eeyore better than most. You've heard about the Scottish Calvinist, every time he fell over he got himself up, dust himself off, and said, "Well, thank goodness that's over." Well, what is it that Eeyore would perhaps, that moaning mini, would say to us? Well, we wish you well, but man is born to, what is it, man is born to trouble, man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. Well, that comes from the oldest book of the Old Testament, in Job chapter 5, and perhaps the older members who have been around the block a time or two, more than spring chickens like myself, will say, "Well, you got that one right, man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

Well is it just an occasion for us to indulge in a degree of self-pity, or is it just realism? We make our way through a veil of tears, and though around this time of year we wish one another every blessing for a new year, we recognize that we will have at least some degree of trials and tribulations brought into our lives. So in God's providence it's fitting for us to mark these words that James opens up his epistle, "Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds." Well how are we to prevent ourselves from just falling into self-pity when life seems to be against us? Counting it all joy is probably the last thing that is upon our minds but we need to pay close attention to the word of God and not just simply grab hold of a few lines, not even a complete sentence, and misapply it in such a way as will be injurious even to our own hearts. We need to pay close attention to what God is saying to us in his word.

It's not the theology of "The King and I," perhaps there are still those who are old enough to remember that musical, Yul Brynner, an improbable king of Siam, king of Thailand, and the governess who comes and lands upon that foreign shore. "Whenever I feel afraid," I'm not going to sing it, "Whenever I feel afraid, I whistle a happy tune, then no one will suspect I'm afraid." Well, the younger members won't have a clue what I'm talking about, but you older folk will give me that smile of recognition. Is that what God is telling us to do in his word, that we find ourselves confronted with a difficulty so we just sort of whistle and pretend everything is just fine and it will make everything go away, no one will have any idea that we have or are facing any difficulties whatsoever? What James is not doing at this point is giving us some secret as to how we can face our difficulties or disasters that enter in unbidden into our lives. "Just do this. Take this pill, let it dissolve under your tongue and everything is just going to be just fine. I've got the secret and now I'm going to tell you what it is." Well, why do I say he's not giving us a secret? Because straight away he says, follow it closely, "for you know," verse 3, "for you know." Not something that is private to James, no secret discovery, no new truth which has been unfolded before his eyes which now he wants to impart to his hearers. No, he says, "you know, you know how to do this."

"Count it all joys, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." Well, that word is altogether too bland. It's perhaps the best word that we have for it to translate it in English. It fits very well and gives us at least an idea but in the original, it actually has a somewhat, not different but a more colorful expression. It says, "Count it all joy when you meet your various trials, when you meet your many-colored trials." That's the word that has come to mean "various" for us. Variegated, many-colored trials. And truthfully, we know from perhaps at least a certain amount of our own experience, what a bewildering array those trials may be. An almost infinite variety and I for one, and perhaps you along with me, always hesitate to say to someone passing through any difficulty, "I know what you're going through," because what that other person is going through is in their experience, and all that goes to make up that particular trial, perhaps you haven't experienced it in its fullness. So especially when speaking to those who are incarcerated in the IDOC, I shrink back as no doubt you would if you were in conversation with them. I'm saying, "I know the difficulties that you're facing." No, I don't. I don't know the fullness of all that they are going through when they desire to be

released, when at a particular season of the year they would give an arm or a leg just to spend a few hours with family and away from that particular institution.

It's not therefore a simple selection of half a dozen possibilities, some of which you can anticipate and perhaps others to which you would respond, "Well, where did that come from?" But whatever the variegated, the multicolored trials that you might face and which almost inevitably you will face, if not in 2024, at some point in the future, James is saying count it all joy. But pay close attention to what James is saying. He's not saying that we should count the trial itself a joy. This is no first book of masochism for us to subscribe to, whatever pain you're going through, "Can I have another one, please, sir?" No, he's not saying that it's the trial itself that we should rejoice in. Listen closely as I read these words to you again, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for..." Now boys and girls, when you see that word "for," it can be used in different ways but it's often used in scripture to say what you have just been thinking about, I'm going to give you an explanation for, for this reason. So he's not saying rejoice in the trials for their own sake, he's saying that those trials are put there for a purpose and now he's introducing us to that purpose, "for, 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."

It's not the trial that we should greet and count all joy, but it's what results from that trial that we rejoice in and at this point, I particularly want to point you to the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have your Bibles open, you hardly need to turn back any pages at all, just a couple of pages in my edition of Holy Scripture to Hebrews chapter 12, and we'll read the first paragraph. It's just two verses. And boys and girls, as we read through what the writer to the Hebrews has to say in the opening of chapter 12, I want you to be keeping in mind what James says just a couple of pages later, "Count it all joy when you pass through trials for its working good and benefit, something that will be a blessing for you for time and for eternity." Bear that in mind now as we read from chapter 12 verse 2, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." I'm going to stop there. Do you see how the theme is so much the same? Difficulties are coming and run that race with endurance. Run it with endurance. Endure it. And then he goes on to tell us, in the comfort of our souls, "looking to Jesus." Let that sink in. Passing through trials and tribulations, the race that is set before us, we run it with endurance, "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 seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

"Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." He did not enjoy the cross but as that cross was set before his eyes, and he knew the full weight of taking upon his shoulders, the weight, the guilt of your sins and of mine, he looked beyond it, beyond it to the joy that was set before him, rejoicing not in the cross, but that which lay beyond. And that's exactly what James is saying and we need to steel our hearts to this great biblical truth. I don't know what 2024 has in store for you or for me, but I know that if God is pleased in his sometimes inscrutable providences, to lay a great burden upon my

shoulder, let me look beyond that to the joy that is set before us. We take up the cross for the joy that is set before us. He wasn't rejoicing in the cross, no more than James would encourage us to count it all joy simply to have trials, but he would point us to that which lies beyond.

We don't go looking for those trials. They come to find us out. So why are you to rejoice? Not because you like sorrow or heartache or distress. Count it all joy because of the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. Now from time to time, perhaps testing your patience, I'll use an illustration that comes from at least some of my time at sea. There's something called a RAS. Now if you don't know what that is, it's just an acrostic, the initials R-A-S, Replenishment At Sea. I want some replenishment at sea. It enables a ship to stay at sea longer and it extends its capacity for endurance because the ship will run out of supplies. And so a supply ship comes alongside and between the two ships is stretched a rope and on that rope is suspended the supplies to be taken to the other ship; you can even exchange personnel, put someone on the end of that hook and transfer him from one ship to another. Well, before you can do that, you have to test it with weights, the weight of a man, to make sure that the rope and those that are holding on to the end of the rope are strong enough to keep it out of the water. If the ship is moving along at about 15 knots or so, I can tell you, you do not want to have your feet dangling in the water. You test the weight and that's what God is doing with us. He says, "I'll test it and I'll show that you who are weak in faith that I have this. I'll show to you that you can endure whatever is set before you because the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." God in his fatherly care of us is saying, "You need to trust me."

I had a text from a dear, dear friend, a very close friend of mine. He was in ER with his wife and clearly being swept away to ER was not something that he had envisaged or looked for. And as we texted, I sought to remind him that it is when the path is obscured from our view that we learn to trust in our God. When we can see the path laid out before us quite clearly, we can take those steps as on a bright summer's day. It's when it is dark and we're not sure where our foot will fall that we learn to trust in God and that we learn that we are in his hand. Even as we have prayed, "Lord, take hold of me," and whatever 2024 has in store for you or for me for good or for ill, know that he is the one who is leading us along that path.

So those trials produce something in us, a steadfastness and that steadfastness leads to having its full effect, being perfect and lacking nothing. Well, there's a sense that we use the word "perfect" in which often is used in scripture, and it means complete. Perhaps you've used it of something. Let me use an illustration. Perhaps boys and girls, your mum is making you a birthday cake and well, if it's a birthday cake, of course, it needs to have lots of icing. Can you ever have too much icing on a birthday cake? And you think, "No, no, you can never have too much icing!" Well, actually, yes, you can. It's the balance between having the cake and the icing that makes it so desirable. When you have the right amount, it's perfect, it's complete. Well, let me use a similar illustration for those of you who are not tempted by birthday cakes. Supposing you're going home for your Sunday lunch and there's that bit of pork or beef or chicken or whatever you're having for your Sunday lunch, and you think, "Just a little bit of salt on it would just bring out the

flavor." Put too much salt on it and it becomes inedible. Too much salt, "I can't eat this. It's just like eating salt." Just a touch. That. Just perfect.

Brethren, that's what God is doing with us in our trials. Yes, it will be difficult at times and there may be many a tear shed in 2024, but God is working miracles of grace in your heart and in mine. To what end? Count it all joy for you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. You're stronger as a result. You've tested your faith and you have confidence that God has worked miracles of grace in your heart. Why is it that you are trusting in God when your neighbor has not a thought for the things of God? It's because God in his grace and mercy has opened your heart to receive these things, and when you come through tested, tried by the trials through which you pass, you have a confirmation, "God was the one who was working in me both to will and to do and he has brought me through." My faith is not some vacuous hope of an empty promise but it is faith and trust, confidence in the living God we'll be made complete, made whole. At the resurrection we will be made perfect, made whole, and those who have suffered the loss of a limb will be made whole. There will be no missing limbs in eternity. There will be no one who is confused of mind with the passing of the years, no one who is deprived of intellectual ability. But best of all, no one will be deficient in his likeness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect, complete, lacking in nothing". Do you see, therefore, where counting it all joy leads us? Do you see where it leads? Jesus, we're told, set his face towards Jerusalem and then we read from Hebrews chapter 12, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." And you and I are called to be his servant, to be Christlike in this world, that we don't take our comfort, our hopes, from the passing pleasures of this world. We enjoy them in their place but those passing pleasures will give us little comfort in the face of death. So we count it all joy when we face the trials because we would have Jesus molded in ourselves, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." Thankful for all that God brings our way, even the trials. Perhaps we might say, especially the trials because it is those very trials that will lead to us being perfect, complete, lacking in nothing. May God grant to us all confidence in his goodness and his mercy.

Let's pray together.

Our gracious God and our Father in heaven, we thank thee that in thy sometimes perplexing providences, we are led along a path which we would not have sought out for ourselves and desire not to walk, but we thank thee, Father, that even and we daresay in thy presence, especially in the times of trial, we are made more complete. So we would heed the words of James and whatever this coming year has in store for good or for ill, count it all joy. May the trials which thou art pleased to lead lay upon us result in that fulfillment of the promise set before us in thy word that that will be for our greater blessing and that we will be made perfect, complete in Christ. Hear us, we pray, for it is in his name that we pray and for his sake. And all God's people said, Amen.