

WHERE DO YOU STAND WITH YOUR FAITH? 1

“Consider It Pure Joy”

Psalm 16, Luke 6:20-23, James 1:1-12

“In his autobiography *Just As I Am*, Billy Graham recalls a story demonstrating that **true greatness is not defined by wealth or fame, but by character**. He says: ‘Some years ago Ruth and I had a vivid illustration of this on an island in the Caribbean. One of the wealthiest men in the world had asked us to come to his lavish home for lunch. He was 75 years old, and throughout the entire meal he seemed close to tears. “I am the most miserable man in the world,” he said. “Out there is my yacht. I can go anywhere I want to. I have my private plane, my helicopters. I have everything I want to make my life happy, yet I am as miserable as hell.” We talked to him and prayed with him, trying to point him to Christ, who alone gives lasting meaning to life.’

“Then we went down the hill to a small cottage where we were staying. That afternoon the pastor of the local Baptist church came to call. He was an Englishman, and he, too, was 75--a widower who spent most of his time taking care of his two invalid sisters. He was full of enthusiasm and love for Christ and others. “I don't have two pounds to my name," he said with a smile, "but I am the happiest man on this island.’

“Billy Graham relates how he asked his wife, Ruth, after they left, ‘Who do you think is the richer man?’ She didn't have to reply because they both already knew the answer.”¹

It's so true in our society today. We think that the accumulation of riches, and wealth, and possessions and power will make us happy because we can do whatever we want to do. We think that when we've got everything our heart's desire, that joy and peace and contentment and happiness will naturally come to us. We think that when we have it all, then there is no worry about today or tomorrow, so we can live it up and not have a care in the world.

However when we look into the lives of the world's richest people, we don't see contentment, or peace, or joy, or happiness, but rather misery and often anger or depression and even despair and rage.

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003] pg. 243)

Money and wealth and possessions and power do not make us happy! Life in pursuit of the world's riches is the most empty life there is. If our life is spent only in the accumulation of possessions, we are surely empty and desperate people.

And we hear King David state the same thing in Psalm 16 when he says, *“I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord; apart from You I have no good thing.’ I say of the holy people who are in the land, ‘They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.’ Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more...”* (Ps. 16:2-4a). Empty pursuit of worldly possessions alone does not bring us life, but suffering and misery.

You see, a choice must be made in the midst of our life. We must choose to either give ourselves over to the things of this world, and pursue them with all our hearts; or to give ourselves over to the things of the Lord and pursue Him with all our heart. It's one or the other, with no middle ground. If all we want are the things of this world, our lives will be miserable. But if we desire the things of the Lord God Almighty, then we are given the assurance that our lives will be rich with blessings untold. Though we be poor in material wealth, and humble in positions of power, we will be rich in spiritual blessings and we will be the happiest people on earth, no matter what happens to us. And as we heard last week from Ken King, the way to real life is to be happy and content in the Lord.

David states it clearly, *“Lord, You alone are my portion and my cup; You make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.”* (Ps. 16:5-6).

When we choose to follow the Lord God, let Him be the One we seek, and allow Him to guide our lives, there is nothing that we will lack. Though hardships and turmoil will happen in our lives, when our faith in God is grounded in seeking Him only, **He** will make *“known to us the path of life”* and we will find His presence with us forever.

So we begin this series called “Where Do You Stand With Your Faith” and we look at the book of James to guide us into a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ so that we might find the path of life,

even when difficulties come our way. I invite you to listen to these words of James 1:1-12. (READ James 1:1-12).

Now, there are several things that we need to consider here. The first is “What happens to our faith when trials and struggles come our way?” **James is quick to say that we are to “*consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds...*” (James 1:2).** On face value this seems absolutely ridiculous to think of trials and difficulties bringing “*pure joy*.” One might think James was a bit goofy when he said this, because trials and struggles don’t usually make us joyful. But that’s because we don’t see them in the right way.

As we get surrounded by various kinds of trials, the usual response is for us to become upset, and angry because the trials surrounding us are often crushing. Many times we lose our focus and we could even lose our faith because of such trials. Yet James tells us that when struggles surround us, we have the opportunity to show and experience genuine joy. Now how in the world did he come up with something like that?

Well think of it this way. Like the wealthy man in the opening story didn’t have a worry in the world because he had everything he wanted, there was no need to depend upon the Lord God for faith. When life is good, we have very little reason to turn to the Lord God, and therefore our faith is weak because we “have it made” on our own with material possessions. But take those possessions away from us and the lack of faith drives us to great despair and depression, even to the point of taking our own lives. That happened early in the Great Depression of the 1930’s, where former millionaires took their own lives because they had nothing left. The loss of their possessions and their lack of faith in their life caused them to give up. Without their possessions, they saw themselves as worthless people.

Yet, when we are surrounded by struggles and trials of various kinds, when life seems to be a burden, we are forced to recognize that we have little control over our life, and we have the opportunity to depend upon the Lord God Almighty for our very life. And when we “*keep our eyes always on the Lord*” we come to realize that “*with Him at our right hand, we will not be shaken*” (Ps. 16:8). Faith in

the Lord our God gives us the confidence that He will never leave us or abandon us, but will provide for us, even in astounding and miraculous ways. And when we have that kind of assurance of the Lord's presence in our life, we can rejoice in the Lord no matter what happens to us.

That kind of faith results in the second thing we must notice, “*The testing of your faith produces perseverance*” (James 1:3). As we are continually surrounded by trials and struggles, we become more and more in dependent upon the Lord for the essence of life itself. Then it becomes second nature for us to trust in the promises of the Lord because when we have faith in Him, we know that “*He will not abandon us to the realm of the dead...*” but rather He “*makes known to us the path of life*” (Ps. 10-11).

Consider this for a moment: how does a ship's captain become a good ship's captain? It's not by cruising the high seas and never encountering a storm. No, **a good ship captain becomes a good ship captain as he gains status and experience because he has endured the storms on the high seas.** He has weathered the storms out and persevered the trials, and he has found what needs to be done to keep the ship in one piece and the crew safe. He is a good ship captain BECAUSE of the storms of life that he has persevered!

That's what James is telling us. It is the storms of life, the struggles and trials of various kinds surrounding us, that cause us to give up on our own independence and instead, turn to the Lord God and seek His strength and wisdom and guidance. As we turn in faith to the Lord, He gives us the endurance and perseverance to endure those trials. And as we persevere in the trials, our faith grows stronger in the Lord. As we stick to it and tenaciously cling to our faith in the Lord, He provides for us and allows us the endurance we need to go on. It is through the storms of life that our spiritual stamina is developed and strengthened.

Then **the third thing that comes from this passage of Scripture is that as perseverance allows us to continue in our life, our faith matures and comes to completion** enabling us to find pure joy in the midst of those trials in our lives. The perseverance finishes its work and guides us to all that

we need from the Lord, because our faith in the Lord Jesus becomes fully grown within us so that we are “*not lacking anything*” (James 1:4).

But James invites us to seek the wisdom of the Lord if we lack it in our life. God is generous and non-judgmental about providing His people with His wisdom when we turn to Him for His help and guidance. He wants us to be fully prepared as we face the trials and struggles in life, and His wisdom effectively leads us into life. In the time before perseverance completes its work to bring us pure joy in our life, we may still lack the understanding we need to endure life’s struggles and trials. God does not hold that against us, but is willing to supply His wisdom in our life when we seek His help.

However, when the Lord gives us His wisdom, we have to believe and not doubt (Ja. 1:6). As we grow in our faith and trust in the Lord, His wisdom is to be trusted so that we can continue to grow to maturity in our faith. To seek the wisdom of the Lord and then to doubt that wisdom results in uncertainty and disbelief. **The prayer that moves God to provide wisdom to us must be demonstrated by a consistent and solid faith.**

Otherwise, if we seek God’s wisdom and yet do not believe it, it produces confusion. It would be like someone stating adamantly “I believe!” but in the next moment shouting “I don’t!” And it shows up not only in the words, but in the actions of the one who does not trust in God’s wisdom. It is demonstrated in their personal life, their business life, their social life as well as in their spiritual life, where ineffectiveness results from the lack of believing in the wisdom of the Lord Jesus. And James tells us that this kind of person “*should not expect to receive anything from the Lord*” (Ja. 1:7).

The wisdom and perseverance of the Lord are given to us so that we might experience pure joy in our life, no matter what the struggles and trials we face. “*But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (Hebrews 11:6). It is in response to our faithfulness in the Lord that God gives wisdom to those who ask it of Him. And it is this wisdom of the Lord that enables us to persevere through the times of trouble in our lives, so that we might find the pure joy from the Lord Jesus.

You see, “we are chosen for joy. **However hard the Christian way, it is both in the traveling and in the goal, the way of joy.** There is always a joy in doing the right thing. When we evade some duty or some task, when at last we set our hand to do it, joy comes to us. The Christian is the person of joy. The Christian is the laughing cavalier of Christ. A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces.” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2)²

“There is too much solemnity and intensity in dealing with sacred matters, too much speaking in holy tones. The tragic loss in all this pious gamesmanship are the individuals in the pew, who begin to feel that in the midst of the religious razzle-dazzle they cannot get through to the Lord Himself.

My hope is that “we have learned that joy is more than a sense of the comic, more than earthly pleasure, and to a believer even more than what we call happiness. Joy is the enjoyment of God and the good things that come from the hand of God. If our new freedom in Christ is a piece of angel food cake, joy is the frosting. If the Bible gives us the wonderful words of life, joy supplies the music. If the way to heaven turns out to be an arduous steep climb, joy sets up the chair lift.” (Sherwood Wirt, *Jesus, Man of Joy*)³

No matter what our struggles or trials may be in life, James invites us to experience the pure joy that comes as we put our dependence and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The world leaves us empty and unfulfilled and often miserable when we trust in its ways. **But the Lord Jesus is faithful to provide us with great joy all along life’s journey when we put our hope and trust in Him.**

And James points this out vividly. He makes the bold statement, “*Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position*” (Ja. 1:9). Those with firm belief in the majesty of God in Jesus Christ who are in low positions in life (that’s most of us), though we may have moderate resources available to us, we can rejoice because we are counted by God as His children. What more could we ever hope for than to be counted among the family of God?

² (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s ... Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg. 323)

³ (Ibid, pg. 322-323)

Therefore, our humble circumstances are not to make us bitter or discontented. Our standing as children of God is to outrank any social situation we are in so that we rejoice in being counted as God's people! As believers in Jesus, we are lifted up in the eyes of God and given new dignity and new worth, even in our poor and humble condition. And as we face hardships, persecutions and struggles of various kinds for the Name of Jesus Christ, we are lifted up to new positions of honor for the Lord that more than compensates for our low earthly status. The fourth thing we need to receive from this Scripture is **“Our standing with the Lord God is much more important than any worldly position.”**

James is making it quite clear to us that the worldly things of life do not create joy, but rather our position in the sight of God as His children. When we see that, when we truly comprehend the importance of our position within the family of God, there is no reason for us to be gloomy, discontented, or envious of those who have great worldly possessions or positions of power.

In fact, James' next statement exemplifies this very thought. *“But the rich should take pride in their humiliation - since they will pass away like a wild flower...”* (Ja. 1:10). The ones without faith in the Lord Jesus who hold great material wealth and positions of power have all the status and fame of this world, but they lack any such standing in the eyes of the Lord our God. Their lives will come to an end and they will have no more value in the sight of God than what wild flowers are to us.

When the sun rises and shines its scorching heat onto the wild flowers, the petals of their blossoms fall to the ground, and the plant withers up and dies, contributing only nutritional value to the worms in the soil. Though they once had great beauty and stature, their life comes to an end and there is nothing left of them, not even a memory.

James relates this to those who have great wealth and positions of power here on the earth. The beauty of the flowers suggests the eloquence of fine clothing and privileged life, showing off to the world how wonderful they are. But upon the onset of struggles and hardships, such as the hot blazing sun, they shrivel up and die because they lack any real depth of faith in anything beyond themselves. Suddenly, with great surprise, even in the busyness of life itself, their end comes and their “beauty and

elegance” is gone. Those who are rich are then reduced to the level of common people, and they have no more hope. Their dignity and worth was only in the earthly possessions and power they had here on the earth, but there is nothing for them beyond this life because they have rejected the wisdom of the Lord God and have relied upon their own salvation instead. What humbling words to all who find themselves with great wealth or those in positions of great power. It is a warning to each one of us of the importance of having deep faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The only thing we take from this life on into eternity is what we do with Jesus.

And this takes us to the final thing we need to understand from this portion of the Book of James; **those who persevere the various struggles and trials of this life with faith in the Lord Jesus will find their lives blessed.** They are the ones who will find and experience pure joy through all of life because they trust in the power and provision of the Lord Jesus Christ, and live their lives in effort to please Him.

James makes it clear, *“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised those who love Him”* (Ja. 1:12). The distinctive joy of the Lord is given to those who put their trust in Jesus and then doggedly pursue Him throughout their lives though faced with struggles and trials of various kinds. The perseverance of their faith produces this great joy because the believer knows the value of following the Lord. In the words of the familiar song, “For I know Whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I’ve committed unto Him against that day” (2 Timothy 1:12),

Perseverance under trial results in approval of God through Jesus Christ, and that approval results in “the crown of life,” the reward given to the believer who is victorious in their struggle against trials. It is the crown of pure joy given to all who will believe in and follow Jesus Christ. Let’s pray.

Father, thank You for faith in Jesus Christ! He is the One who enables us to endure and persevere all the trials of life so that we might experience pure joy in all things. Grant us Your wisdom so that we might continue to pursue Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and find His joy in us all the days of our life. In Jesus’ Name we pray. AMEN.