

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF UPLAND

"JOY IN TRIALS"

Noel K. Anderson, Pastor

One of the great blessings we get from Scripture is this weird idea that Christians possess joy even in suffering, misfortune, and trials of all kinds. In a Roman prison, as Paul writes to the Christians at Philippi, he references joy fourteen times. Phrases like "that your joy may be complete" are repeated, and these from Christians under direct persecution.

Jesus concludes the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount saying,

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." —Matthew 5: 11-12

Odd, isn't it? Author Flannery O'Connor has a quote about us Christians that fits this strange relationship between faith and trials. She said:

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you *odd*."

This wasn't a generic statement; she was talking about Christians and Christianity. There is nothing odder about us than that—from the beginning—Christians have always rejoiced even in the midst of suffering, affliction, injustice—trials of all kinds.

Our text from James, the "brother" of Jesus, gives us this same instruction—that we should count it as joy when we feel under attack by this life's afflictions.

James 1: 2-4 *ESV*

- 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.

TRIALS OF VARIOUS KINDS

Life is not fair. Consider Job. Job was a good man but was beset by unthinkable trials. One thing this world is sure to reveal in history, literature, and personal experience is that good people tend to get into trouble. In a fallen world, good people are *odd*. Misfits.

It is only too easy to list all the things in this life that make up what James calls "trials of various kinds," so I'll spare you the details but give you the generic list:

- Loss of loved ones
- Afflicted health
- Betrayals and character assassination
- Being overpowered or oppressed
- Injustices galore

Life is full of things to make us cry, “Why me?” but Christ calls us to be steadfast without sacrificing our joy.

Faith may be inconvenient in the worldly view, but Scripture is full of people who had to give up their dreams in order to be obedient to God. Did this rob them of joy? No, but strangely the opposite. Obedience to God and denial of the world seems to be the spiritual formula for sustaining joy.

Jonathan Edwards, power-preacher of America’s First Great Awakening, said that joy is essential when faith is authentic, and a sad saint is a sad sort of saint.

The former Pope Francis was described as one with low-burning joy like a constant purr.

A joyous heart is a *secure* heart.

STEADFASTNESS

James tells us that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. What is steadfastness? It means standing our ground on the truth—that Truth that makes us odd. It is life securely built on the rock of Christ rather than the sands of this world. When the wind and waves come, we are unmoved, solid, secure, steadfast.

If this sounds like an invitation to be stubborn, cranky, and always right in your imagination, think again—that’s not what it means. To be steadfast means to adhere to what really matters (your and my opinions do not matter much at all). To be steadfast is to be faithful to God as He is faithful to us—which He is in perfection. God is perfectly steadfast, perfectly reliable in His promises, faithful to His Word, true and truth in all things.

For us to be steadfast under trial requires that we are well-anchored to something other than our pride, desires, or neediness—these are all part of sand, not the Rock. As we adhere to Christ in various trials, we become increasingly confident in doing so. We laugh at the wind and waves, and the bigger the storm, the greater our joy through endurance.

Steadfastness is not in our nature. Our nature is to trust nothing but our own eyes—which is to trust in ourselves alone—a failed formula for living.

Steadfastness is long-term faithfulness—*sticktoitiveness*—secure adherence to the rock through and beyond the hurricanes of misfortune.

Steadfastness is what Israel lacked—falling again and again into idolatry.

Steadfastness is not possible without the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Steadfastness is the greatest witness to Christ we can have in this world. .

STEADFAST SAINTS & MARTYRS

Steadfastness is a gift of the Holy Spirit—one to be encouraged and respected at every turn. From the beginning, this has characterized true Christian faith. Shortly after

Pentecost, a group of Christians preaching Jesus were pulled before the Sanhedrin and rebuked. We read about in the Book of Acts chapter 5:

40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.
41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. — Acts 5: 40-42

Steadfastness produces joy—and perhaps this is the “full effect” that James desires the followers of Christ to know and enjoy.

This steadfastness made for a tremendous witness, which the world saw as odd indeed. Pliny the Younger, writing a letter to Caesar about these “followers of Chrestus,” writes:

“Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ — *none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do* — these I thought should be discharged.

This is the true Church—the fellowship of those founded securely to the Rock of Christ. This is the witness that *matters*.

The true faith is manifest in steadfastness and joy. We hear stories of the early saints who, when imprisoned in dungeons beneath the Coliseum—awaiting death by gladiators, lions, tigers, and crosses of fire, sang with joy because God had deemed them worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus.

That is the real stuff, and it ought to make us think twice. Those early martyrs knew less about Jesus than anyone in this room. There were no written gospels, just the testimonies of other followers and the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage them. and they went to the lions for it. Joyously. Singing.

So how big are your trials in comparison?

REACH FOR JOY

We know God’s grace is constant—God loves us and has acted in Christ for our salvation—but we can live the saved life with joy or without it. According to the Bible, God wants us to live with *joy* as well as grace. God provides the grace, be we are called to reach out for joy

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds

I want to offer five practical ways we can count it all joy. The way I’m wording it, it spells out the word *REACH*:

REFRAME IT

Whatever you're going through, compare it against history. Remember those saints—some of them teenagers—who sat beneath the Coliseum awaiting their deaths, but did so praising God and singing from the heart. So what are you worrying about?

Consider the suffering of others and remember how good we have things, even our trials.

I have to quote humorist P.J. O'Rourke here:

Right now. . . is the best moment in all time, and right here, in the United States, is the best place to be at that moment. And do I hark to sounds of glee echoing mist purple mountains' majesty and rolling across the fruited plains? No. I hear America whining, crybaby to the world. I behold my country in a pet—beefing, carping, crabbing, sniveling, mewling, fretting, yawping, bellyaching, and being pickle-pussed. A colossus that stood astride the earth now lies on the floor pounding its fists and kicking its feet, transformed into a fussy-pants and a sputter-budget. The streets of the New World are paved with onions. Everybody's got a squawk. We have become a nation of calamity howlers, crepe hangers, sour guts, and mopes—a land with the grumbles." (from "All the Trouble in the World Atlantic Monthly Press, p.4).

We count it joy by reframing the problem.

END ENVY

Stop comparing your life to others.

I have to revert to my stock image of a track meet. You're running in your lane on the track, and as you look out to the outer lanes of the oval, you see people that have it so much easier—all their hurdles are 12 inches high. It's not fair! They have it so easy and seem to have all of life so much easier.

Your hurdles are all 4 feet high and you smack them with every leap. And then you come to an 18-foot wall in your lane! It's not fair!

Here's the thing: End envy. Stop comparing your life with others.

Our life's hardships are better thought of *not* as assaults from the Devil, but as the training events from our God who is the most Loving Coach. Consider it: those people on the outer lanes who seem to have it so easy can only clear 12 inch hurdles, but God knows something about *you* that the world cannot see; you were made to clear 4-foot-hurdles, and that 18 foot wall? God is going to teach you pole-vaulting! Others could not do it, but that doesn't matter because He's calling *you* to do it.

Which brings us to A:

ACCEPT YOUR ADVENTURE

God is our Loving Coach perfecting us and growing our abilities through every trial. This isn't about mere survival; it is about spiritual flourishing. It is about obedience and becoming everything God has created you to be.

"Why me?" you ask God. "Because you are special indeed and I love you tremendously!"

We should take on this life's trials in joy as our Loving God's prescription for our sanctification—our growing into Christlikeness.

Simone Weil was an odd saint and is one of my heroes. She was an atheist, Jewish, communist frenchwoman living a hundred years ago. She was kind of crazy but a total genius. She became a Christian beyond all expectation of family, friends, and herself. She was visited by Christ. More than any writer I know, she valued suffering as a form of loving God. that is Joy. She says:

Love of God is pure when joy and suffering
inspire an equal degree of gratitude.

Can we feel gratitude even for suffering? Yes, which brings us to C:

CARRY YOUR CROSS

Luke 14: 26-27 says:

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Authentic discipleship carries a cross. By God's grace, we can consider every trial and affliction as part of the cross we carry for Christ, because of Christ, and with Christ. No matter what we suffer—no matter what trials this life drops on us, we are yoked together with Jesus and that means it's all joy because we are with Him and nothing else matters.

And this life is short. This life and its sufferings are short, but Joy has no end, which brings us to H:

HEED THE HEAVENLY CROWN

Remember the reward. From the Sermon on the Mount, as I mentioned at the start:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” —Matthew 5: 11-12

We can count on eternity even when this life is vicious. But this is a hard—if not impossible—thing for anyone who doesn't believe in Heaven. Whoever cannot believe in Heaven can only live for this world and its rewards.

Make no mistake: those who live for this world alone are the spiritually dead.

When can count all things Joy by our REACHing, because God's grace has made all the difference to us.

I want to close with a *non-sequitor*—a poem for Mother's Day by Poet Laureate Billy Collins. I don't think he meant it to be deeply theological, but it is. Our mothers love us

and their love is in so many ways like God's love. We receive that love like ignorant children who have no concept of the many sacrifices our parents make just so we can exist and live in this world. The poem is a man reflecting on his boyhood relationship with his mother. It is called *The Lanyard*.

THE LANYARD BY BILLY COLLINS

The other day as I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room
bouncing from typewriter to piano
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
I found myself in the "L" section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word, Lanyard.
No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one more suddenly into the past
A past where I sat at a workbench
at a camp by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid thin plastic strips into a lanyard
A gift for my mother.
I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
Or wear one, if that's what you did with them
But that did not keep me from crossing strand over strand
again and again until I had made a boxy, red and white lanyard for my mother.
She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted teaspoons of medicine to my lips,
set cold facecloths on my forehead
then led me out into the airy light and taught me to walk and swim
and I in turn presented her with a lanyard.
"Here are thousands of meals" she said,
"and here is clothing and a good education."

“And here is your lanyard,” I replied,
“which I made with a little help from a counselor.”
“Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth and two clear eyes to read the world” she whispered.
“And here,” I said, “is the lanyard I made at camp.”
“And here,” I wish to say to her now,
“is a smaller gift. Not the archaic truth,
that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took the two-toned lanyard from my hands,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove out of boredom
would be enough to make us even.”

We certainly take God’s love for granted, but shouldn’t. And this Mother’s Day, let us not take our Mothers for granted, but grow into a similar love for others.

QUESTIONS

1. What is steadfastness?
2. What does it mean to “let steadfastness have its full effect”?
3. Why is steadfastness reason enough to rejoice in our various trials?
4. Why is steadfastness a key measure for our spiritual wholeness?
5. What things get in the way of our “counting it all joy”?
6. What things can we keep in mind as we make our way through various trials?