

James 1:2-4
Joy in the Junk

Main idea: Because of Jesus, we should, can, and will have joy at all times.

So lately, and especially this last week, I've been a bit grumpy. And when I get this way, I tend to take it out on others, which makes me even more grumpy that I am the way I am, and then I start complaining to myself about myself that I complain about anything and everything.

Do you ever do that? Be honest in the chat. We're all human, having the same struggles. What's the last thing you remember complaining about?

Maybe you complained this week that your family members haven't been doing their share. Or maybe you complained yesterday that your weekends don't feel very restful because there's always something that you need to do. Or maybe you complained this morning that you don't have anything clean to wear to church, even though no one will see you because we're online! So, what's the last thing you complained about?

I think the last thing I complained about was probably while I was singing this morning, that I just don't have a great singing voice! I mean, I really can't do anything but make a joyful noise!

But I think making a joyful noise, whether through singing or just through our actions, really is how to fight having a complaining spirit.

As I said last week, for the next four or five months, we're going to be studying the book of James. The book of James addresses some extremely practical issues that we all struggle with. In very simple ways, James challenges our lifestyles and corrects our backwards thinking. And the very first issue that James addresses is having joy.

Let's read James 1:2-4.

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. (James 1:2-4)

Father, help us to go through the trials we face with joy, knowing that You have a plan for our good. Help us through every trial to have faith in You, and glorify You. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Throughout the Christmas season, I preached on the good news of Jesus's birth. The angel announced that it was good news of great joy that shall be for all the people. And I asked you to think about how much joy you typically have. You might remember this Joy-o-meter.

[Joy-o-meter]

Do you have little to no joy, some joy, or great joy? And does your level of joy change based on your circumstances?

I think if we're honest, most of us would say that we don't have great joy, and that our joy does change based on our circumstances. That's just part of our human experience. Now, we could talk about how joy and happiness aren't exactly the same thing, and that joy is more of a deep-rooted disposition based on our faith in

God, and I think that's true to a degree. But the Bible actually never explicitly makes that distinction, and usually uses joy and happiness interchangeably. For example, it says in Jeremiah 31:13:

I will turn their mourning into joy...and bring happiness out of grief. (Jeremiah 31:13b)

Joy and happiness are used synonymously. And I think it becomes even more clear when we compare Isaiah 52:7 with Luke 2:10. Isaiah says:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness (Isaiah 52:7a)

And then, Luke 2:10, which we've looked at several times over the last few weeks, says:

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. (Luke 2:10b)

So the good news is both good news of happiness, and good news of great joy. And I don't think the Bible is saying two substantially different things in these verses. It's just saying the gospel brings joy to all the world.

Think about it in your own life. Does the gospel actually make you happy? Like, does it bring you joy not just about what will happen in eternity, but does it bring you happiness today? And if it doesn't, maybe you need to think about your understanding of the gospel. Jesus didn't just die on the cross so that we could be saved some day in the future, but so that we could be saved from our sins today. So that we could be transformed today. Does the gospel cause you to joyfully transform you to be who God wants you to be?

So as I studied our Scripture passage for this morning from the book of James, I realized that James was saying the same thing. James was saying that because of Jesus, we should, can, and will have joy at all times. I'll say it again, because this is the main point of the sermon. Here it is: because of Jesus, we should, can, and will have joy at all times.

Now, that's a pretty big statement and promise, so let's break it down. First, James is telling us that we should have joy at all times.

James gives us this command to "count it all joy." Verse 2.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. (James 1:2)

Honestly, I find this command kind of hilarious! It would be like if I went up to one of you, got in your face, and shouted, "Be happy! I'm ordering you to be happy! What's the matter with you?!? Just be happy!"

Can you make yourself happy? Can we just decide to be happy? I think we can to a degree, by choosing to dwell on good things, and yet I think the kind of happiness James is talking about it's just a superficial, slap a smile on your face kind of happiness. It's finding the source of our happiness not in anything that we can muster up from within ourselves, but in Jesus.

I think this might be one of the most difficult and rewarding commands in all of the Bible. It's not easy, and the Bible's not saying that it's easy, because if it were easy, we wouldn't need the command. But the reward for considering everything as joy is that no matter what's going on in your life or in the world, you have peace.

Because James tells us to count it ALL joy. It's easy to count our blessings as joy. It's easy to count joyful things as joy. But it's so incredibly hard to count difficult trials as joy. How can we possibly be joyful during, or even about, such things?

Can you think of a time that you had joy during, or even because of, a trial?

Let's talk for a minute about trials. Some trials seem like obvious tests of faith. When someone with a gun announces, "I want all the Christians to stand up," you have a choice in that moment to stand up for Jesus and possibly lose your life, or stay quiet and save your life. That sure seems like an obvious test of faith, and it is.

But I'm not sure the right answer is always to stand up, because that would be to allow an unbeliever to determine the genuineness of your faith, and I think that's like casting your pearls before swine.¹ When the Pharaoh of Egypt wanted all of the baby boy Israelites to be killed, the midwives hid the babies and lied about it in order to save their lives.² When the people of Jericho wanted to kill the Israelite spies, Rahab hid them and lied about it in order to save their lives.³ When Paul first became a Christian, the Jews wanted to kill him because of his new boldness in sharing Christ. But he hid from them and escaped by night, saving his life.⁴ So I'm not sure allowing unbelievers to just kill us is always the right answer. When we send missionaries to foreign countries today, they often have to be very careful about when and who they share Jesus with, because they win more people to Christ when they don't shout the gospel from the mountaintops, which would lead to their arrest, but rather when they whisper it in the valleys.

It's true that sometimes God calls people to give their lives in a moment, like Stephen did as a martyr,⁵ but for most of us, He calls us to give our lives everyday, as we seek to honor Him and share Him with others.⁶ But at the very least, I think all of these types of trials should cause all genuine believers to feel tested.

Other trials may not seem like obvious tests of faith, but really are. When you wake up in the morning and have a full schedule, and you feel like it's impossible to get everything accomplished, what you decide to do displays what you have faith in. If everything you do is about making money, then it might be that money is your god. But if you're determined to do everything to the glory of God, then you show that God is your greatest treasure.⁷

And, you know, we bring some trials on ourselves. I think even those trials are tests of faith. When you sin in some way, and are faced with the consequences, how you face those consequences is a test of faith.

So I think what James is really commanding us to do when he tells us to count it all joy, is to have faith. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that faith is the evidence of things unseen.⁸ So in essence, James is saying, "Even when you can't see it, God is working for your good."⁹ Even when things are hard, and especially when things are hard, we can have faith that even through the trials, God is working it all out for our good, so we can have joy.

James even goes on to say that. He writes in verse 3:

¹ Matthew 7:6

² Exodus 1:15-20

³ Joshua 2:1-7

⁴ Acts 9:20-25

⁵ Acts 7:55-60

⁶ Luke 9:23

⁷ Matthew 6:24

⁸ Hebrews 11:1

⁹ Romans 8:28

for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (James 1:3)

This is interesting. James equates counting it all joy when you face trials with the testing of your faith. Notice that it doesn't say that it's A test of faith, but THE test of faith. In other words, possibly the best indicator of your spiritual health is whether or not you're living a life full of joy.

So it's not only that we should have joy at all times, but actually that we can have joy at all times. As we mature in our faith, we will be more joyful everyday.

Do you find yourself, over time, becoming more joyful, or less? Do you find yourself becoming more happy about what Jesus has done for you, which leads you to having a more happy disposition, or do you find yourself becoming more and more grumpy as time goes by?

I find that the more I dwell on me and on what I perceive to be my rights, the more grumpy I am. But the more I focus on God and His desires for me, the more I have joy.

I really don't know where so many people have gotten the idea that God wants to take people's fun away. God literally commands us to be joyful! Christians ought to be the most joyful people on the planet because we have a Savior that forgives all our sin. People ought to look at Christians and be like, "Why are you guys so happy all the time?" Even when things are tough? Even when everyone else has nothing but complaints? Even when there's a global pandemic, people ought to look at Christians and think, "I want what he's having!"

We can and should have joy in the middle of all the junk of life because the junk of life gives us actual opportunities to practice genuine faith. Having faith doesn't mean much if life is easy. If life were easy, and everything always went the way we wanted, we would have no need for faith. It's when life is hard that our faith comes into play.

We've probably all seen at least bits and pieces of the Olympics over the years. What's your favorite Olympic sport? I don't know why, but I'm mesmerized by curling. It's like shuffleboard on ice. I love it. It looks so simple, but I'm sure the athletes have to train and train and train in order to be the best at it. You can't possibly get that far, competing at the Olympic level, unless you really love the sport.

Imagine waking up one morning and saying, "I want to do curling at the Olympics," or whatever your favorite Olympic sport is. Ignoring the fact that you might already be too old to do it, the thing that would make the difference would be whether your love for the sport is so great that you're willing to endure the endless training to become absolutely perfect.

And as you live a life full of joy, James writes that you become steadfast in your faith. That means that while it might not be easy to be joyful at first, it becomes more and more natural as you practice it. Maybe you've known someone in the past who just got happier and happier as they got older and older. They stopped worrying so much about all the little things that cause us to have bad days, and they chose to just enjoy every moment no matter where they were or who they were with. That didn't just happen. That took a process of intentionally deciding every day to have joy in Jesus even in the midst of all the junk of life.

So, today, will you find your joy in Jesus? No matter what's going on in your life? Every single one of us is facing some kind of battle. Maybe it's with your spouse, or your kids, or your parents, or your workplace, or with our government, but even in those circumstances, can you choose to be joyful?

Paul wrote in Philippians 2:14-15:

Do everything without complaining or arguing so that you may be blameless and innocent, God's children without any faults among a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world. (Philippians 2:14-15, ISV)

Paul and James seem to be saying that as God's children, we ought to reflect God's goodness and light by being people who don't complain. So, let's forget about last year, and all the complaining we did then, and let's decide to go forward without arguing or complaining, so that we might become more steadfast in our faith with joy. Verse 4.

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:4)

So not only does deciding to be joyful increase your faith, and increase the steadfastness of your faith, but it also leads to you being perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Now, we know that we can never be perfect in this life because we'll always battle with sin, but that's not really what it's talking about. It's talking about spiritual maturity. It's talking about contentment. It's talking about getting to a point in your life and faith in which you truly believe that you've already received every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

And in the life to come, we truly will be perfect and complete in every way, lacking in nothing. And I think that's because faith will express itself in maximum joy. We'll always and forever count it all joy. We'll have perfect freedom, and we'll be absolutely steadfast in faith because we'll never even desire to sin again.

You see, because of Jesus, we should, can, and will have joy at all times.

The Bible says this in Hebrews 12:2.

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. (Hebrews 12:2)

It's interesting to me that when Jesus rose from the dead, His disciples could still see His nail-scarred hands. They could still place their hands and feel where His side was pierced. And certainly, this was for a practical purpose, so that the disciples could see that it was truly their Savior. And yet, I think it's also because our scars from this life actually increase our joy.

Because in the end, all our sorrow will be turned to joy.

This whole life is like one big trial. In this life, we're given opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to practice having joy in the junk, and as we do that, we're getting ready for eternity, when we can look back at all the trials we endured with joy.

Maybe instead of complaining about every little thing, we can learn to have joy in every little thing. Instead of complaining about family members not doing their share, we can praise God for them. Praise God that you have family members that you can serve and point to Jesus through your service. Maybe instead of complaining that weekends don't seem very restful because there's always something you need to do, be joyful that life is never dull and uneventful. Praise God that He gives you work to find joy in. And maybe instead

of complaining that you don't have clean clothes, be joyful as you participate in church this morning in your underwear. No one can see you anyway!

So, if you feel like complaining, remember Jesus. He came, and died, and rose again so that you could have an abundant, joyful life in Him.