

# Joy And Trial

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James 1:2 tells us to "count it all joy when you fall into various trials" or "Greet it as pure joy, my brothers, when you encounter any sort of trial" (Moffatt). During my Christian life, as trials came along, I would think of this verse and try to "put on a happy face." I thought that this is what God wanted.

In December 1996, my wife Carol became ill with what doctors later diagnosed as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes. As her illness came to dominate our lives—and impact the lives of so many others—I wondered, "*How* can you be joyous in the midst of affliction?" Should we disguise our pain with false bravado? Does God expect us to be immune to normal human emotions?

Of course not!

So what is this joy that we should feel, and how do we show it? Why is it important?

Early in our trial, I began to keep a list of lessons to be learned, things that I felt God was showing me. This list became very long and continues to grow. As with any trial, it can have a multitude of angles, causes, purposes and effects. For this article, however, I will isolate the aspect of joy and later give three lessons I learned.

## What Is Joy?

Webster defines joy as "a condition or feeling of high pleasure or delight; happiness or gladness." After a few glasses of wine or a nip of Jack Daniel's, we can be in "a condition . . . of high pleasure," but this is a temporary effect—not the type of joy we seek.

How does having a Positive Mental Attitude (PMA), pushed by today's motivational speakers, fit into real joy? There is something to driving oneself to stay positive, but too many people try this kind of pop psychology with no foundation under them. It expresses itself as forced, contrived and transparently artificial.

When I was a freshman in college, some of the so-called leading seniors used this forced PMA. When one of these would see another—maybe passing each other on the sidewalk heading to class—the first one would sing out in a loud voice, "HOW ARE YOU?" The second would respond in a similar tone, "JRF!" The rest of us would scratch our heads and say, "JRF?" It turned out to mean "Just Real Fine!"

In both the Old and New Testament, the words translated "joy" mean much the same as the English word: gladness, cheerfulness, calm delight. In the New Testament, the Greek word *chara* is the noun form of "joy," and is used 51 times. Interestingly, the first 23 occurrences (through Acts 13:52) describe an emotion. People are glad about something that has happened, as in Luke 6:23: "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven. . . ."

Beginning in Acts 13, however, a subtle change occurs in the usage of *chara*. Of the remaining 28 times it appears, fully half tie joy with trials, suffering, persecution and the like. Why?

My conclusion is that a change had begun to take place in the church about this time. The first 20 years had passed, and now the apostles were dealing with a more mature body of believers. The people's problems had become more substantial, stemming from a lack of application rather than a lack of knowledge.

Also, about this time, the apostle Paul emerges as the dominant figure. Scholars think that he may have written the epistle to the Galatians about this time. Galatians 5:22 lists joy as the second fruit of the Holy Spirit. Taking the view that the church was coming under fire, and Christians were struggling to grow, we can suppose that Paul began to see and teach joy in a different light.

Joy is more than PMA or even JRF. *Chara* is more than just a warm, fuzzy feeling. It is a character trait tempered by fire!

### **What Are Trials?**

We know that trials are a given—that Christianity is a "narrow" way. Paul told many new converts, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Later, he wrote the Hebrews:

Surrounded then as we are by these serried ranks of witnesses, let us strip off everything that hinders us, as well as the sin which dogs our feet, and let us run the race that we have to run with patience, our eyes fixed on Jesus the source and goal of our faith. For He Himself endured a cross and thought nothing of its shame because of the joy He knew would follow His suffering; and He is now seated at the right hand of God's throne. (Hebrews 12:1-2, Phillips)

Christ has shown us the way. Because of the tremendous joy that awaited Him, He endured a trial the likes of which we will never face. We have the same joy awaiting us—eternal life! But getting from here to there will not be easy.

The following note was posted—anonously—on a college bulletin board:

This life is a test.  
It is only a test.  
Had it been an actual life,  
You would have received further instructions  
on where to go and what to do!

Fortunately for us, we *have* received further instructions, including how to handle the inevitable bumps and potholes in the road of life.

Hebrews 12:6-7 shows that God corrects His children, allowing them to be strengthened through testing:

For the Lord corrects and disciplines everyone whom He loves, and He punishes, even scourges, every son whom He accepts and welcomes to His heart and cherishes. You must submit to and endure [correction] for discipline; God is dealing with you as with sons. For what son is there whom his father does not [thus] train and correct and discipline? (Amplified Bible)

Peter adds,

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. (I Peter 4:12-13)

When a trial comes upon us, we tend to think, "Why me? What have I done wrong?" We may have done nothing wrong. Trials are necessary for growth.

Imagine being a college student, knowing that your progress needs to be measured. How can that be done without testing or examination? If we do away with tests, how do we gauge growth?

Count your trials as joy, James 1:2-3 says, "knowing that the testing of your faith [through trials] produces patience." "Testing" is *dokimion*, meaning "to prove." *Dokimion* describes the process of proving sterling coinage, that it was genuine and unalloyed. We can conclude, then, that God's testing process has the goal or aim of purging us of all impurity, to make us "perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (verse 4).

### Three Lessons

This brings me to three lessons my family's trial has taught me:

**1. *Trials should produce growth*** . Just as we prune a shrub or tree to force it to grow into a more perfect form, so God does with us. William Barclay makes an excellent comment on this:

. . . these tests or trials are not meant to make us fall, they are meant to make us soar. They are not meant to defeat us; they are meant to be defeated. They are not meant to make us weaker; they are meant to make us stronger. Therefore we should not bemoan them; we should rejoice in them.

Notice I wrote that trials *should* produce growth, rather than that they *will* produce it. Sometimes, we just do not learn the lesson; we fail; we regress; we sink into self-pity. This leads me to another lesson learned.

**2. *The fruit we produce depends on our outlook*** . This does not imply that anger and depression are not normal human emotions. They are. When we received the news that Carol had cancer, we did not shout for joy. We cried—a lot.

With any trial, you wonder why. You evaluate your actions, your mistakes, your sins. You repent, fast and pray. You cry out to God with more emotion than you knew you possessed. If you are normal, you have moments of anger, perhaps even doubt.

Here is where we can produce fruit or destroy it. With God's help, we must forcibly evict these carnal thoughts from our minds. We cannot allow seeds of doubt to germinate, and if they do, they cannot be allowed to grow. We must look forward and deal with the situation.

Shortly after Carol's diagnosis, I talked to a man who had lived with the knowledge that one of his loved ones, a child, would soon die. He knew that his child would never become an adult. I asked him how he maintained such a cheerful outlook and positive demeanor. He simply said, "I just play the hand I'm dealt."

He did not yell and whine about his lousy cards. He did not throw them down and wait for a new hand. He played the game, if you will, with the cards he had been given.

Paul writes:

. . . we know for certain that He who raised the Lord Jesus from death shall also raise us with Jesus. We shall all stand together before Him. All this is indeed working out for your benefit, for as more grace is given to more and more people so will the thanksgiving to the glory of God be increased. This is the reason why we never lose heart. The outward man does indeed suffer wear and tear, but every day the inward man receives fresh strength. These little troubles (which are really so transitory) are winning for us a permanent, glorious and solid reward out of all proportion to our pain. (II Corinthians 4:14-17, Phillips)

So it is good advice that we not resent our trials or bemoan our fate or the state in which we find ourselves. As James says, "Count it all joy," which brings us to the next lesson.

**3. Joy comes after, not before, the trial—and often not during it** . No sane person sits around, wishing he had a trial. That is absurd. No one is ecstatic to find himself encompassed in pain. Only when you have faced your troubles and started to fight can you begin to see even a glimmer of a positive result at its conclusion.

James' advice is to count or consider our trials joyfully. The Phillips' version continues, "Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce endurance" (James 1:3). These words reflect a passage of time. Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before Him." He thought nothing of the pain and shame because of the joy He knew would *follow* His suffering. Joy came afterward.

Hebrews 12:11 says, "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Here is convincing proof that joy is primarily post-trial.

Yet even this joy is not the ecstatic, "Hallelujah!" kind of joy. *Chara* means "cheerfulness" or "calm delight." God's Spirit does not produce in us a gloating, "I did it!" kind of emotion, but a cheerful peace of mind, an awareness that we survived and grew. We feel a kind of satisfaction that God has

pruned us so that we might become more like him. This process helps us to appreciate our lives more, and to be more thankful, understanding and sympathetic to the plight of others.

Carol has received hundreds of cards and letters during her illness. One in particular came from a lady with a long-term illness. As she came slowly out of her own personal struggle, she passed on to us several things that we found to be true. One line she wrote is very true: "I never realized how wonderful it is to be able to do ordinary things until I couldn't do them." She had "never realized." Yet now, because of her trial, she counted or considered her situation and found joy in a simple act.

By sharing this with us, she gave us hope and encouragement. We saw this new perspective as positive. This is fruit borne through testing. It is God's refining process at work. He is removing impurities.

As hard as it seemed, after giving them much prayer and thought, we found that each trial was specific to us. It was what we needed to make us more like God. We did not see this initially, but through perseverance and growth, it became clear.

This is why we are happy that God has chosen us to suffer whatever trials He may allow. As James goes on to write:

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (James 1: 12).