

Pure Joy in Trials

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ... Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. – James 1:2-5,12

Joy is the last emotion you would expect when you've just been told that you no longer have a job, or when you're in a hospital room and have just heard you have cancer, or when the laundry is piled high and the kids are sick and there's little food in the house and the money is running low and you haven't slept for three days. We don't even want to think about perseverance when making it through the afternoon seems like an insurmountable challenge. What is James thinking when he tells us to consider these trials pure joy, not just joy but *pure* joy?

Trials can make us feel despondent, helpless and out of control. Satan loves it when we let problems overwhelm us. Satan loves it when we forget to take our burdens to God in prayer, thinking that we must take care of everything by ourselves. Satan loves it when we put our energy into anger or denial. Then he can fill our minds with doubt and frustration, telling us we really don't deserve anything better or asking us how our loving God can let all of this happen. He may even convince us to blame God for these trials. He creates a downward spiral that pulls us further and further away from God.

But according to James our trials are really sources of joy because they are signs that God loves us and wants to pull us closer to him. This isn't a flippant thought. The writer of Hebrews (12:6-12) reminds that God disciplines those he loves for the same reason human fathers, in love, discipline their children. Trials are a good thing when they drive us to our knees to ask God for help. Our faith is strengthened as we relinquish control and put our trust wholly in God's promise from Romans 8 that all things work together for our good.

Paul struggled with some type of trial, which he called his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12). When he asked God to remove this difficulty from his life, God said no. God's grace would be enough for Paul and would carry him through all difficulties. Paul realized that in his weakest moments, God's work in his life was the strongest. Like Paul, we persevere when we lean on God's power and trust completely in his promises.

Even Jesus was greatly tried while here on earth. In the Garden of Gethsemane, with great intensity, he asked his Father to keep him from going through the tortures of his last days. As horrible as he knew those days would be, he ended his prayer with a willingness to submit to his Father's will, confident that his Father would see him through. The writer of the Hebrews reminds us that we should get our

encouragement from Jesus' example. Jesus saw joy in his torturous last days because he knew it was necessary if the human race would ever be reconciled with God. (2 Corinthians 12:1-3)

God knows we are weak and our faith is sometimes shaky. This is why we need a Savior. Because of the Jesus' death and resurrection, our sins are completely forgiven. When a repentant sinner comes to God, God doesn't see the many sins committed; God sees the perfection of his Son, Jesus, our Savior. God doesn't find fault with his forgiven children when they come to him in prayer because this is exactly what he wants them to do. The prayer of a repentant sinner shows confidence in God's love, God's power and God's wisdom. God loves to hear these prayers and answers them with generosity.

The blessing for those who persevere under trial is contentment and peace. It is the contentment and peace that comes from knowing that God is in complete control of this world and he has only our best interest in mind. It is the contentment and peace that comes from knowing with confidence that our earthly life will end with eternal life in heaven.

This is the joy that James is talking about; not a transient emotion but rather the deep-seated contentment and peace that we have through Jesus.

Prayer from selected verses of Psalm 139:

- ¹ O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
- ² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- ³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
- ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.
- ⁵ You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
- ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain. ...
- ^{16b} All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be. ...
- ²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
- ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

The devotion was written by Marilyn Miller, a staff minister in Houston, TX. *This devotion is written for an adult significantly burdened with a difficulty in life. In addition to the message of the devotion, it was*

designed to help the person find a number of places in the Bible where God's comfort and strength is given to his people. The theological content was reviewed by Martin Luther College Professor David Sellnow.