

THE JOY OF DIFFICULTY

Sunday, April 22, 2018

THE JOY OF DIFFICULTY

I. We don't automatically count a time of trial as "all joy."

A. If we did, God wouldn't have had to tell us to do it.

James 1:2-4, NKJV

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2, NIV – Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

James 1:2, NLT – Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.

B. How many consider it "all joy, pure joy, & great joy" when you go through trials & troubles?

1. God did not say, "Make it ok in your mind when you're going through trials."
 - a. This would be a step up for many of us. Naturally-speaking, we see trials as a negative. So to make it "OK" would be pretty good.
2. But God said, "See it as completely joyful when you're going through the difficulties of life."
 - a. "Can we really have joy when going through difficulty?"
 - b. I believe we can, or God wouldn't have told us to do it.

II. Many years ago, in 1931, a very popular cookbook came out: "The Joy of Cooking."

- A. It was published at a time when there wasn't a lot of joy in the world. It was during the beginning years of the Great Depression (not much "joy") in the US, when people didn't have many of the conveniences they were used to having just a few years earlier (this included a lot of the food).**
- B. The author of "The Joy of Cooking", Irma Rombauer, privately published only 3,000 copies in 1931. Yet its success was so great that just a few years later it was published by a commercial printing house, & has now sold over 18 million copies.**
- C. Interesting fact: In 1930, the year before Irma first published The Joy of Cooking, her husband committed suicide. She was 52 years old, had been married to him for over 30 years.**
 1. She wrote "The Joy of Cooking" for two reasons:
 - a. To make some money, of which she had very little.
 - b. To help get her through the tragic loss of her husband.

1. She knew she had to have a new mindset; get her mind set on something other than only the tragedy she had experienced.
2. From that aspect, she was very smart.

III. Much like “The Joy of Cooking”, the lesson you’re about to hear today may be coming at a time when you may not be experiencing a lot that you think you can be joyful about.

A. You could be facing some long-time things you’ve struggled with, or perhaps a challenge that is newer to you.

1. A few in here could even be dealing with some tragic events in the recent past, just as the author of the cookbook was facing.

B. One thing I can guarantee you is this: regardless of whether you’re going through a challenge right now or not, troubles & difficulties are on their way.

1. It’s not a matter of IF you’ll face challenges in the future; it’s a matter of WHEN.

John 16:33 – ...in the world you will have tribulation...

C. Here’s another thing I can guarantee you: if you’ll go into challenges with a right mindset & understanding, not only will you get through every challenge, but you’ll come out much better & stronger on the other side.

John 16:33 – These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

IV. My lesson today is entitled: “The Joy of Difficulty.”

A. That can sound like an oxymoron. How can there be joy in difficulty?

1. It doesn’t make sense if we approach life from our own natural thinking.
2. But if we approach life from a biblical perspective, we can have joy, right in the middle of life’s greatest challenges.

V. This “joy” we read about in James 1, isn’t necessarily a “I’m really happy right now” joy.

A. It isn’t an “I have a huge smile on my face & I’ll act like nothing negative is going on” type of thing.

1. In fact, this joy knows it’s facing challenges & difficulty.

B. Yet in the midst of trials & challenges, we can...

1. Have faith in God...
2. Have peace in our heart...&...
3. Have a positive outlook, knowing that we’re going to grow stronger, & be better, by going through the challenge.

Hebrews 12:2 – Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

C. In the middle of the worst suffering any human has endured, Jesus saw beyond the moment, & looked to the end result.

1. Jesus didn't want to go through the cross, but He chose to go through the cross, because He knew the gain that would come from it.

D. I'm not here to tell you that if you approach life from a biblical view, you're going to want to go through tough times or you'll feel like going through tough times.

1. I am here to tell you: If you approach life from a biblical view, you can get through tough times with God's joy giving you the strength that you need.

Nehemiah 8:10 – ...the joy of the Lord is your strength.

2. We need all the strength we can get, as we face the trials life can bring.
 - a. If we'll grab onto God's joy as we journey through difficulty, we'll have a strength to help us through.
3. Difficult times don't destroy us, or make us better.
 - a. How we respond to difficult times can destroy us, & how we respond to difficult times can make us better.
 - b. I'm challenging you today to respond with God's joy.

Back to Heb. 12:2, AMP – ...endured the cross, despising *and* ignoring the shame...

VI. To ignore something doesn't mean it's not there, or that it's there but then goes away because we ignore it.

A. To ignore something means: we acknowledge its existence, but it's not going to be what we look at.

1. Ex: Car accident on side of road. Pay attention to it, it can cause another accident. Ignore it, get through it safely.
2. The same happens to us when we pay attention to, or ignore, a problem.

B. God doesn't tell us to deny the existence of a problem. He simply says: Get your focus off the problem, & onto something else.

1. "What should my focus be on?" One answer...GOD!

Read Ps. 34:3 – Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.

C. When we magnify something, it doesn't actually get bigger.

1. It simply appears bigger in our vision, in our mind.

D. By magnifying/focusing on God, we're not making Him bigger. He's already as big as He needs to be.

1. We're simply changing our view Him; correcting our view of how big He is.

2. However big we see God, we can magnify Him more...yet we still won't be close to seeing Him as big as He really is.

E. Example: We're going through life & we walk into a problem.

1. We can stare at the problem & occasionally glance at God...or...stare at God & occasionally glance at the problem.

2. When we stare at God, the problem is still there, it may even be getting bigger.

a. But in our minds, the problem is getting smaller as our God gets bigger, as we magnify Him.

VII. One way we magnify God in our minds, is by reminding ourselves of His promises, the truth from the Bible. Truths like (make them personal):

A. Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

B. Psalm 46:1 – “God is my refuge & strength, my very present help in trouble.”

C. Isaiah 54:17 – “No weapon formed against me shall prosper.”

D. Nehemiah 8:10 – “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”

E. James 1:2 – “I count it all joy when I fall into trials.”

VIII. As we keep our mind focused on God & God's word – the Bible – God gets bigger, & we get bigger on the inside, stronger, more secure.

A. Then we occasionally glance at the problem (don't stare at it) and say, “Is that all you got? I've got this great big God!”

Isaiah 26:3-4

You will keep *him* in perfect peace,

Whose mind is stayed on You,

Because he trusts in You.

⁴Trust in the LORD forever,

For in YAH, the LORD, *is* everlasting strength.

1. Our problems will come & go, but in God we have everlasting strength.

a. God – & His strength – always remain with us & are always available to us.

XI. In the Bible, we see many examples of God’s people making the choice to stress during difficult times, or to choose to “count it all joy” during difficult times.

A. Ex: John the Baptist.

1. Proclaimed Jesus as “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
2. Yet in difficulty – when thrown into prison – John focuses on the problem & begins to question what he believes.
 - a. John questions if Jesus really is the Messiah.
 - b. John tells his disciples to ask Jesus if He’s really the Son of God, or should we be looking for someone else.
3. He starts to doubt God, God’s word, God’s plan for his life – “maybe I missed it.”

B. Even those in the Bible that we would consider strong in faith, we’re tempted to give in during challenging times.

C. The early church of the N.T. often did see trials & troubles as an opportunity for growth.

1. In **Acts chapter 7**, Stephen is put to death for preaching about Jesus.

Acts 8:1, 3

1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...

3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

- a. It’s important to understand that the “trials” James & others in the Bible referred to, weren’t that they couldn’t pay all their bills, or they had a sore throat.
- b. The “trials” they referred to were a bit more severe...like being put in prison, being tortured, & that other things called DEATH!

Acts 8:4-8

4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.

6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.

8 And there was great joy in that city.

2. How could there be “great joy” when the church is going through such horrific persecution?
 - a. Because they viewed opposition & problems as a means of growth.

3. The troubles the church faced, resulted in the gospel spreading to where God wanted it to go.
4. Challenging times are often the thing that will help you expand & grow, and get you to places you wouldn't otherwise get to in life.

Acts 13:49-52

49 And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region.

50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.

51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium.

*They didn't focus on the problem; they simply kept going on with life, magnifying what God could do.

*Some of you need to shake problems off your feet [shake foot] and focus on your great big God!

52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

*The "counted it all joy" as they kept their mind set on God's plan & purpose for their lives.

X. Some of the greatest growth in my life, has happened, as a result of going through some of the greatest challenges of my life.

A. We often don't realize that, until after we've gone through the trials & challenges.

1. Maturity says in the midst of trials & challenges: I will grow through this, I will become stronger because of this.

B. Helen Keller once said: "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experiences of trial...can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

C. Challenging times – troubles, trials, difficulty, whatever you want to call them – are not fun on their own.

1. But if we'll see that our right response to them will result in our growth, life will become so much more fulfilling.

XI. Be aware: I'm not saying that God brings all the trials & challenges that come our way.

A. Many of the difficulties we face in life, are simply because we live on this sin-cursed earth.

1. When Adam & Eve sinned, God's first message to them was: because of the choice you just made, you're going to have some pain you wouldn't have had.

B. Some difficulties arise because of choices we make.

C. Other trials we face are from our enemy, the devil.

John 10:1 – The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly.

James 1:17 – Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

1. God is not sending tragedy & pain. He’s a good Father, a much better parent than any of us.
2. He wants to bring good things to His children.

D. Although many of the challenges we face don’t originate with God, they can end with God.

1. If we look to Him to get us through, we’ll come out better in the end.

Romans 8:28 – And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.

E. Romans 8:28 does not say all things are from God. It says all things can work for good, regardless of why we’re going through them.

THE JOY OF DIFFICULTY – CLOSING

I. I want to close my lesson today by sharing 2 stories.

II. In the first story we read about the prophet Elisha going to a city called Shunem.

A. There’s a married couple in the city that takes care of Elisha whenever he passes through town on his journeys. They have a room made up for him to sleep & live in anytime he wants.

1. Eventually, through Elisha, God tells the woman that she’s going to give birth to a son, which she does.
 - a. Based on what we read, it appears the couple has no other children, for sure no other son.
2. We’re going to pick up the story when the son is a child, we don’t know exactly how old.

2 Kings 4:18-26

¹⁸ And the child grew. Now it happened one day that he went out to his father, to the reapers. ¹⁹ And he said to his father, “My head, my head!”

So he said to a servant, “Carry him to his mother.” ²⁰ When he had taken him and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and *then* died. ²¹ And she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, shut *the door* upon him, and went out. ²² Then she called to her husband, and said, “Please send me one of the young men and one of the donkeys, that I may run to the man of God and come back.”

²³ So he said, “Why are you going to him today? *It is* neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath.”

And she said, “*It is well.*” (Note: remember those 3 words.) ²⁴ Then she saddled a donkey, and said to her servant, “Drive, and go forward; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you.” ²⁵ And so she departed, and went to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

So it was, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to his servant Gehazi, “Look, the Shunammite woman! ²⁶ Please run now to meet her, and say to her, ‘*Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with the child?*’”

And she answered, “*It is well.*”

B. The story continues on, ending with Elisha praying for the boy, & the boy coming back to life.

III. Consider this mother, who is encountering the greatest challenge of her life.

A. **Death is always extremely difficult. The death of a child has to be one of the greatest tragedies a person can face.**

1. In the midst of that indescribable pain & confusion, she seems to do everything she can to not focus on the tragedy in front of her, but instead, on the God who could help her.

B. **In the OT, people didn't have the "direct line access" to God that we now have today. So her pursuit to get to the prophet Elisha is actually her determination to get to God.**

1. Later on in the chapter, between the time where we read to & the time her boy is brought back to life, we read about her reaching Elisha & clinging to his feet.
2. Then Elisha tells his servant to go to the boy & pray for him.
3. Look at the mother's response to that...

2 Kings 4:30

And the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you." So he arose and followed her.

3. What the mother was basically saying was: "No offense, Elisha's servant, but Elisha, I'm looking to the living God for help, & I'm looking to you, so unless you both suddenly drop dead, you're coming with me!"

IV. By giving us the freedom of choice, in a big way God has limited what He can do in our lives.

A. **Having faith in God is a choice we each make. It's through us choosing to have faith in Him and have faith in the Bible, that God can do all that He wants to do for us, in us, & through us.**

1. I wonder if in the midst of the trials we face, if God is saying, "I need you right now to look 100% at Me, & have a complete trust in Me, maybe like you've never had before."

B. **When this Shunamite woman said, "It is well", she was having to ignore every emotion, every pain, every doubt, & 99% of the voices in her head... & she was choosing to look to the one place she could find an answer.**

C. **This story ended with the woman's son being brought back to life. I want to share another story with you that has a different ending...**

V. The final story I want to share with you today is about a man by the name of Horatio Spafford.

A. **Born in New York in 1828.**

B. **When he was 32 years old, he married Anna Larsen in Chicago.**

C. **They went on to have 4 daughters & a son.**

D. **Horatio was a well-known & prominent lawyer in a successful Chicago law firm. He also had significant investments in property in the Chicago area.**

- E. He & his family were highly respected, & things were going extremely well for them.
- F. That all changed in 1871 when, at the age of 42, Horatio watched helplessly as his only son died of pneumonia at 4 years of age.
- G. That very same year, just days before Horatio turned 43, the Great Chicago Fire took place. His property investments, which had been substantial, were now worth nothing. He was financially ruined by the fire.
- H. For the next 2 years he worked to establish some financial stability. Unfortunately, in 1873 an economic downturn took place, which caused Horatio's financial situation to once again suffer greatly.
- I. Later that year he & his family were going to travel to Europe. In a late change of plans, Horatio sent the family ahead while he was delayed on business concerning zoning problems following the Great Chicago Fire.
- J. While crossing the Atlantic, the ship Horatio's wife & 4 daughters were on, collided with another ship and sank rapidly.
- K. Of the 313 people on board the ship, only 87 survived. 226 people perished, including all 4 of his daughters.
- L. His wife, Anna, was one of the few fortunate survivors of the accident.
- M. 9 days after the shipwreck, Anna reached Cardiff, Wales & immediately cabled Horatio. It appears he was unaware that there had been an accident until he received the cable from her. The cable simply read: "Saved alone. What shall I do..."
- N. Horatio immediately left Chicago to bring his wife home from Europe.
- P. On the Atlantic crossing, the captain of his ship called Horatio to his cabin to tell him that they were passing over the spot where his 4 daughters had perished.
- Q. Horatio returned to his cabin, sat down, & wrote the following words:

"When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
 when sorrows like sea billows roll;
 whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
 It is well, it is well with my soul."

- R. He wrote several other lines as well, all expressing the fact that we can have an unending faith in an unchanging God, even when life is falling apart all around us.
- S. The Hymn "It Is Well With My Soul" has been sung for well over 100 years, strengthening the faith of countless numbers of people.
- T. Horatio's story doesn't end here, because he didn't quit. He & his wife went on to have 3 more children.
- U. They later moved to Israel & helped found a group called the American Colony, which served the poor in Jerusalem.

V. Horatio died in Jerusalem in October, 1888, at the age of 59.

W. The American Colony that he helped found continued to grow after his death, opening soup kitchens, hospitals, orphanages, & other charitable ventures.

X. After all of the tragedy he went through, Horatio had every reason to give up on God & give up on life...but he didn't!

Y. He chose to "count it all joy" & move forward in doing what God had put him on earth to do: 1) become more like Jesus & 2) help people in any way he could.

VI. Church: if Horatio Spafford can go through what he went through, & continue on strong with God's plan for his life, we can do the same.

VII. During the upcoming weeks, months, & years ahead, as we find ourselves in the midst of difficulty, challenge, chaos, stress, maybe even tragedy, we can call upon the God who loves us & who promises to help us through everything.

A. Even if the world around us totally collapses, we can say: "It Is Well."

B. We can choose to, "count it all joy when we fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of our faith produces patience..."

CLOSING

I. When you're facing a storm, focus on – and magnify – the God who created everything; the God who's on your side.

A. In the midst of problems, trials, & difficulties – heartache, loss, & hopelessness – I'm not telling you to deny that those things exist.

1. What I'm telling you is: Deny their right to have your attention.

2. Choose to focus on the God who is much bigger than all those issues.

3. And because our minds are focused on Him, & our faith is in Him, we can say with confidence: "IT IS WELL. IT IS WELL. IT IS WELL."