

## Joy in the Morning



In writing my commentary on James I was struck this morning with the command in James 1:2 to ‘reckon it all joy’. Here are some of my reflections on Christian joy and what it might refer to.

The discourse proper opens in James at 1:2 with the astounding command to consider it all joy, including all the trials and suffering. It might be better rendered ‘consider it entirely as joy’ because the phrase should be taken adverbially. But what is meant by ‘joy’ here?

Clearly enough it cannot be seen as synonymous with pleasure (hedone) or even happiness (eudaimona) since this joy exists even in the midst of trials, temptations, suffering. Joy is repeatedly said to characterize the experience of early Christians (Acts 13.52; Rom. 14.17; 15.13; 2 Cor. 1.15; 2.3; Gal. 5.22; Phil. 1.4; Col. 1.11; 1 Pet. 1.8; 1 John 1.4; 2 John 12).

Here in James 1:2 it involves mental calculation or reckoning as the verb *hegesasthai* indicates. But how does one reckon even suffering as joy? Texts like Jn 15:16.20–22, 2 Cor 7:4, 1 Thess 1:6, and Heb 10:34 make clear that suffering and joy are compatible from a Christian point of view.

I would suggest that James is talking about the joy of the Lord here, which in Pauline letters is said to be part of the fruit of the work of the Spirit within the believer. This seems to refer to the sense of contentment that comes from the assurance of and delight in God’s presence in one’s life regardless of one’s circumstances, a presence that is often most evident to the believer precisely when one is in the most duress. This is why the Psalmist says “the joy of the Lord is my strength”. This is a joy that only the presence of the Lord can give. The world, or circumstances can neither give nor take away this joy. This joy cannot be purchased nor stolen. It cannot be bargained for or earned. It is simply a gift from God that is a residual effect of the abiding presence of God in a person’s life. This is not of course the

same thing as feeling happy or cheerful. We must avoid the temptation to reduce this joy to a mere emotion. If one can reckon something all joy then it involves a mental exercise, not a passing emotion.

Our culture is too bound up in the world of feelings, even to the point where counselors ask as their main question – “How do you feel about that? or How did that make you feel?” as if feelings were the ultimate litmus test of what is going on in a person’s inner psyche. Feelings however can be very deceptive, the joy of the Lord is not.

In short this joy James is talking about is not just an experience but a reflection on experiences – all experiences, where the believer says in his heart of hearts “God is holding me in the palm of his hand, whatever comes my way, I shall not be moved or troubled on this day”. Amen.

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