

Waiting and Looking for Joy 2022  
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, 6-7 James 5:7-11

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, 6-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight.

James 5:7-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

These last few years have been very difficult  
and even traumatic for many people we know.  
Covid has been especially hard on the most vulnerable and isolated,  
and many of the people we care about are still struggling,  
almost overcome by a **joyless sense of helpless/hopelessness**.

This world can be very difficult, overwhelming and destructive  
in ways that can warp and distort our sense of hope, trust and joy.

The troubles we endure, our struggles, trials and disappointments,  
the mistakes we make, our sins, our losses and failures in life ,  
can warp & distort our perceptions, our sense of hope, trust & joy.

Yes, don't we all know very well that life can be difficult?,  
that there are disastrous situations beyond our control,  
and that our world can be terribly cruel and destructive...  
... **the challenge is**, how do we live faithfully beyond our problems?,  
and are we experiencing the hope, peace, joy and love  
that should characterize our journey through Advent?

There was research project done back in the 1970's at the Univ. of PA  
in which psychologists were studying trauma and learned behavior.

They'd put a dog into a 2-compartment box, then shock the dog, and it would quickly jump over a barrier into the other section. That was the control group and that was the expected behavior.

In a 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the experiment, a different dog was put in the box, and it would be held in a harness from which it could not escape.

When shocked, eventually those dogs would stop struggling, whine quietly and passively settle down despite the shock. They gave up, having learned by experience that they had no control and that they were helpless to do anything against that trauma.

In the next part of the experiment, with the harness removed the same (traumatized) dogs were put back into the box, and when shocked again, instead of jumping to get away, they would lie down and still passively take the shock.

So then a researcher would attach a leash and demonstrate to the dog that they could jump the barrier & escape the painful shock & trauma.

Afterward, when back in the box with no harness and free to escape, these traumatized dogs would still passively endure the shock, **having learned from experience to be helpless and hopeless.**

That same phenomenon of learned helplessness and hopelessness has been demonstrated in many different animals and even insects. College students also exhibited that same traumatized-behavior.

**So how do you respond to ongoing trouble, disaster and trauma?  
Does a sense of helplessness ever crush you, your hope and joy?**

Is it your fervent prayer and desire to avoid what's coming your way?  
And if you can't get away, is your prayer for it to pass by quickly?

As we read in our meditation today,  
James offers a very different perspective and understanding, 1:2-4.

**My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,** because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

In Romans 5:3-5, the Apostle Paul shares a similar insight, writing to Christians struggling and suffering for their faith:

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

In both passages, the point is being made that our faith develops & grows deeper & stronger **as we persevere**, that as we endure life's storms of struggle & adversity **we learn**, to trust and rely on God and experience for ourselves

the Lord's power, steadfast love, compassion and care.

Faith is not just acquiring knowledge about Scripture and theology,  
but must also include being exercised and stretched in real life,  
**not as passive resignation, but optimistic waiting – looking for joy.**

Here, joy is about grace and hope beyond our current circumstance  
that trusts fully in who God is because we know what God has done,  
**and because trust defeats fear with peace & joy even amid struggle.**

And the promise is, that through God's power and grace and presence,  
even amid our disappointments, suffering, problems or defeats  
God will still accomplish intended good & gain into our lives.

Yes, most would prefer and ask God for life to always run smoothly,  
for us to always be successful, effective and comfortable,  
& never have any difficulties, trouble or complications...  
**... but if it really is God's purpose to build us up spiritually,  
then surely some challenges and tribulation will come our way,  
and the question of faith is how will we choose to respond?**

Now I am not suggesting that every disaster and problem we face  
is specifically sent by God for our spiritual growth and welfare.  
But if we do weather life's storms with faith and trust,  
then we will emerge more spiritually mature & stronger.

**The promise, hope and reality of God's grace and healing purpose  
is for us to know that somehow God will provide blessing and joy  
even amid our suffering, problems, struggle and disappointments.**

Because Jesus is coming, the message of Advent  
is that even amid life's struggles and confusion **we can wait,**  
patiently, because we look ahead in faith and in hopeful trust,  
as we look forward to God's promises & grace fulfilled,  
because God is at work in our lives and in our world.

**The Apostle Paul understood that truth and perspective,  
and that was the way that he choose to interpret  
his own troubles, difficulties and struggles in life,  
by focusing on the Kingdom of God that awaits us.**

We know from the Book of Acts and from Paul's letters  
that he did struggle and suffered a great deal during his ministry,  
and we know that early Christians endured terrible persecution.

The passage we read from his letter to the Christians in Corinth  
was intended to encourage them to trust God & remain faithful, vs. 14.

... because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus **will raise us also** with Jesus, and will  
bring us with you into his presence.

Paul trusts the promises, teachings and truth about Jesus Christ,  
so he writes in explanation about his mission and trust in God,  
that adversity could not and did not distract or disrupt him

because his focus was on the glory of God's coming promises.

As Paul explains, vs. 16-18, 5:1, 7

**So we do not lose heart.** Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but **what cannot be seen is eternal.**

Paul interpreted struggle and adversity not as a mistake or failure,  
but as one of the many ways that God builds and develops our faith ...

**... preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.**

**Beyond present circumstances, Paul's faith and focus ,  
was on the sure and certain glorious promise of the Lord. vs. 1 & 7.**

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens... **for we walk by faith, not by sight.**

Now Paul is not minimizing or denying that our mortal lives  
can be difficult, disappointing & even seem hopeless at times.

But he recognized that his struggles, his suffering and weaknesses  
could serve **to reveal more clearly the glory and wonder of the Lord,**  
and that **his future in Christ was way more important  
than any struggles, difficulties or failings in life.**

**We too can look beyond our troubles, problems and disappointments  
by trusting our God to fulfill his promised kingdom and glory,  
and that the Lord is up to something amazing, glorious & wonderful.**

**For the Christian, life is not defined by the problems we face,  
but by God's promises of love, hope, joy and steadfast mercy.**

We develop that trust and confidence and our hope in the Lord,  
through our suffering, losses, struggles and tribulation,  
because God can use all of that – even our pain, losses & disasters,  
for our good & gain ultimately to produce character, faith and hope.

**But is the Apostle Paul right about that? Is that really the truth?**

Are these just words, a childish illusion or placebo of comfort?,  
or can we reliably trust them, even amid disaster & tribulation?

If you ask any of the more spiritually mature Christians you know,  
they will tell stories about personal experiences of God at work,  
times when they recognized the power and presence of the Lord...  
... and we probably don't share those wonderful stories nearly enough.

**In James,** the focus is on practical living faithfully in this world,  
and when it was written, the earliest Christians were struggling.  
The Jewish community hated and attacked them as betrayers of Judaism,  
and the Romans attacked and persecuted them as enemies of the state.

James is urging them to look beyond their present circumstance, vs. 7.  
Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.

Such patience reveals and reflects the true level  
of our trust in God's timing, providence, power and love.

When I was a little boy, my dad gave me an area for my first garden.  
I planted my seeds and waited eagerly for the plants to come up.

A few days after planting I couldn't stand having to wait anymore,  
so I impatiently dug down so I could see how my seeds were doing,  
and of course in so doing, I killed all my germinating seeds—  
- a good lesson about the importance of waiting and having patience.

James teaches a similar message about patience, vs. 7-8, 11.

The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the  
early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, ... **Indeed we call blessed  
those who show endurance.**

The point is that despite the farmers good effort and hard work,  
there's also some waiting, for much is beyond the farmer's control,  
because there is far more going on that what can be easily seen.

Recently I spent some time with my family back in Virginia.  
It was wonderful with lots of remembering and retelling stories,  
which caused me to reflect on my life events & spiritual journey.

Looking back from who & what I am today, toward who I was back then,  
in every case, though I didn't necessarily see it at the time,  
God was always present with me and sustaining me throughout...  
... **and today I can see more clearly, that God did not waste any of it.**

In every instance there was some **gift of gain**, some blessing,  
teaching, transforming, protecting me or changing my direction,  
preparing and equipping me for the life that God intends for me,  
moving me in ways that otherwise never would have happened.

Now God did not cause my failures, defeats, disasters or struggles,  
but neither did the Lord allow them to have the last and final word.

God built upon them, creating renewal and blessings from them...  
... **for God was up to something good all along.**

**The truth is, "today is not all there is."  
Advent is about that promise, our hope, our peace and cause for joy!**

As Paul explains, 2 Corinthians 5:6-7, 17

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are  
away from the Lord— **for we walk by faith, not by sight.** So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new  
creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!