

Place: Lurgan Baptist 5:10:2003

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Reading: James 1:1-12

4. REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

I wonder have you ever heard the story of Aunt Betty who just loved to hear the Word of God ? But she always presented a problem to the preacher for during the message she would always shout, “ *Praise the Lord.* ” This so upset her pastor that he would lose his train of thought and so every time Aunt Betty shouted out this would throw him, and he would really get messed up. So he went to Aunt Betty and said, “ *Now Aunt Betty I really appreciate you but I wish you would not shout when I am preaching for it puts me off, I really bothers me.* ” He continued, “ *Aunt Betty, I know that you don't have too much materially so I'll tell you what I'll do. If you won't shout I'll get you two of the finest blankets you've ever seen.* ” Well, Aunt Betty agreed, and she came along to the services at the church and held it in, muffed it, and stifled it. Indeed, she did not shout for a month.

Then one Sunday there was a visiting preacher and he got preaching about forgiveness, and the grace of God and she blew it right there for she got so happy that her sins were forgiven that she shouted out, “ *Blankets or no blankets praise the Lord.* ” Would it not be wonderful in this church if we had less chat before the service and a holy hallelujah now and again in the service. We seem in these days to have lost the joy of the Lord. Yet George Mueller would not preach until his heart was happy in the grace of God. Jan Ruybroeck would not write while his feelings were low, but would retire to a quiet spot and wait on God. Its well known that the elevated spirits of a group of Moravians convinced John Wesley of the reality of their faith, and helped to bring him, a short time later to salvation.

In his spiritual classic, “ *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life,* ” William Law once wrote, “ *How ignorant, therefore, are they of the nature of religion, the nature of man, and the nature of God, who think a life of devotion to God to be a dull uncomfortable state, when it so plain and certain that there is neither comfort nor joy to be found in anything else.* ” Now James's very first word to these persecuted and oppressed believers to whom he originally wrote was “ *Greeting.* ” The Amplified Bible says that its literal meaning is “ *Rejoice.* ” In (1:2) he tells them that even when they find themselves surrounded by trials and temptations, pressures and problems they are to “ *count it all joy.* ” The point he is daring to make is that joy is meant to be the normal experience of every believer in every circumstance, because of their unconditional confidence in the overruling power and goodness of God. My ... whatever the circumstances we can rejoice, and face the future with confidence, not in the arrogance of our faith, but in the assurance of God's faithfulness. Now this whole section in (1:9-12) is permeated with joy and in getting its message across, James takes general issues and focuses them in personal terms. He tells us that whatever our circumstances we can “ ***Rejoice in the Lord.*** ” Notice that he says we are to:

(1) REJOICE IN THE MIDST OF POVERTY

The word “*brother*,” tells us straight away that James is referring to a Christian, and the words “*of low degree*,” literally mean “*one who does not rise far from the ground*.” James is speaking of someone who lives in very humble conditions, someone who is very poor. Church history shows that many of the members of the Early Church were from the lowest levels of society. The burial inscriptions in the catacombs of Rome reveal that a huge number of Christians were slaves. They would have been among the poorest of the poor. It is very possible that these humble conditions were brought about by persecution. If you were a Christian, people would not trade with you, and in many cases would not sell to you. If you were a believer you were ostracized by society. Yet James, says to this person with little or nothing “*rejoice*.” Now in worldly terms this of course makes nonsense. For most people the feeling is that happiness goes hand in hand with prosperity, while misery and poverty are almost inevitably linked in their minds. Happiness is winning the National Lottery. Is this not the mind set of most people today ? Happiness is winning the jackpot. But James is not speaking in material terms but spiritual, and it is in this sense that he is able to say that the poor man who becomes a Christian is automatically, and as the result of becoming a Christian “*exalted*,” regardless of whether there is then or later any change for the better in his material circumstances. My we are of great worth to the Lord and we should rejoice in the spiritual things we can never lose. The missionary martyr Jim Elliot said it best, “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose*.” We may be earth’s paupers, but we are heaven’s aristocrats. “*Let of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted*.” (1:9) Now why we can rejoice in the midst of humble circumstances ? Because we have:

(a) A NEW WISDOM:

It has often been true, though more in the past, than now that poverty and ignorance have gone together, or that limited means have meant limited opportunities for education. Certainly many of these 1st century believers would have lacked the knowledge of their richer contemporaries. But then knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing. Back in 1860 a philosopher called Jeremy Bentham said, “*If we can get universal and compulsory education by the end of the century all our social, political, and moral problems will be solved*.” How wrong he was. For man needs something higher than knowledge, he needs the wisdom or spiritual perception of which James speaks here. (1:5-8) And that wisdom is not a matter of education, but revelation, its not something that man learns, its something that God gives. (1 Cor 1:30) This is not to despise education for a Christian has a duty to equip himself thoroughly for his life’s work. But even if we find ourselves at the lower end of the social scale, without the benefits of higher education, we can rejoice because God has given us the tremendous advantage of spiritual insight. You see, the natural man however, intelligent, cannot discern the “*things of God*,” but the poorest believer can rejoice because he has a new wisdom.

(b) A NEW WEALTH:

Its fascinating to read of poor people, or folk in ordinary circumstances who suddenly receive a letter from a solicitor telling them that some long-lost relative has died leaving them a fortune. One day they are among those who “*low degree,*” the next day they are millionaires, not because of a lifetime of effort, not because of industrious ingenuity, but because they have entered into the benefit of someone else’s death and thus have become heirs to a fortune. Its literally a case of rags to riches. Now is that not our position ? Jeremiah speaking of the unsaved says, “*Surely these are poor, they are foolish, for they know not the way of the Lord, nor the judgement of their God.*” (Jer 5:4) But Paul reminds all of us who are believers that “*we are the children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.*” (Rom 8:16-17) Is that not rags to riches again ? And all as the result, not of our own effort, but of the death of Christ and the grace of God. Do you know what grace means ? *Great riches at Christ’s expense.* Does that not agree with what Paul says ? “*For ye know the grace rich.*”

(2 Cor 8:9) My are you rejoicing in your elevated position ? Do you recognise that you are a spiritual millionaire ? Paul says “*in everything we are enriched by Him.*” (1 Cor 1:5) Are you living according to your means ? Yes, we have a (a) (b)

(c) A NEW WARDROBE:

Now if you are unsaved this your wardrobe is pretty pathetic, I mean you’re spiritual one. Isaiah goes so far as to say that “*all our righteousness are as filthy rags.*”

(Is 64:6) Even your best moral and religious efforts are no better in God’s sight than dirty rags. But if you are a Christian this you have a new wardrobe. God has given you the robe of righteousness. (Phil 3:9) But that’s not all. God has given you a complete outfit for daily living. In other words, God has given you the potential for living a holy life something which you never had before your conversion. Paul lists some of our resources in (Col 3:12-14) he says, “*Put on,*” My you may be poor materially, but you have a new wardrobe, the potential for pleasing God in your daily life. Do you see now why James says “*Rejoice.*” (1)

(2) REJOICE IN THE MIDST OF PLENTY

Now the Early Church had folk who were poor and those who were rich. There were men like Joseph of Arimathaea, Nicodemus, and Barnabas the property owner. James has that kind of man in mind in (1:9-10)

Here is a brother, in plenty and not in poverty, and he can also rejoice not at his material success, but at his new spiritual standing. Here is someone who has:

(a) A NEW POSITION IN LIFE:

“*He is made low,*” (1:10) The Amplified puts it like this, “*And the rich person ought to glory in being humbled.*” Would that not be a new position for a wealthy man, who could buy favour and popularity very easily ? You see to be rich was to be popular, but now converted the rich man finds himself in an entirely new position. His business colleagues would probably

reject him, his friends would avoid him as a religious crank. For the very first time in his life he finds that his money has lost its voice. A new position. When General Robert Lee came forward to join a church in Richmond, Virginia, a Chinaman came at the same time. The pastor began to recognise the famous General first, but General Lee spoke up and said, “*Stop, start with the Chinaman first. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.*” My does the gospel not have a great levelling effect ? Do you recall that the Lord and His disciples met two people in Jericho ? *One was in poverty, the other had plenty.* To Bartimaeus the poverty stricken blind beggar on the roadside, the disciples said, “*Rise.*”

(Mk 10:49) To Zacchaeus the wealthy tax collector who had climbed the tree Christ said, “*Come down.*”

(Lk 19:5) Now do you see the parallel to James ? You see, the man in poverty, who in the eyes of the world is not worth much, should find joy in his relationship with the Lord who elevates him to a high position. But the man in plenty should remember that his only lasting security is not in stocks, or bonds, or properties but in his relationship with the Lord. For you see the rich man has not only a (a) he has now:

(b) A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE:

He begins to view things differently. You see, up until now the rich man has looked at everything in materialistic terms. His whole outlook in life has been geared to things he could weigh, see, feel, touch, count or take to the bank. Now he sees his wealth in its true colours. James uses a picture here that would have been familiar to the people of Palestine. You see, in the desert if there is a shower of rain, the thin green shoots of grass will sprout, but one day's burning sunshine will make them vanish as if they had never been. Now that is

1. How TEMPORAL Wealth is:

Its just like the flower of the grass that easily withers. Do you recall Paul says the same sort of thing ? “*the fashion of this world passeth away.*” (1 Cor 7:31) My when we trust in earthly values and material possessions we're trusting the temporary. I heard the story of a man who loved money more than anything else. He worked all his life and hoarded as much as he could. Just before he died, he told his wife, “*when I die put all the money in the coffin with me. I want to take my money to the afterlife with me.*” She promised she would. At his funeral just before the undertakers closed the coffin his wife put a box in the coffin. The coffin was closed and taken away. The wife's friend said, “*I know you didn't put all that money in there. You weren't foolish enough to do that.*” The wife said, “*I promised him I would put the money in the coffin.*” Her friend said, “*You mean to tell me that you put all that money in the coffin with him ?*” “*Yes,*” said the wife, “*I wrote him a cheque.*” My there is coming a day when all of our accumulated wealth is going to be as good as that cheque. When the petals of this fragile flower called life will have withered and died, our possessions are going to be of no value to us. (1)

(2) How CONDITIONAL Wealth is:

Like the grass it depends on the favour of circumstances. Think of the man with what some would call life's advantages ? Do you know what he is concerned about ? Stocks and shares, deals and agreements, speculations and prospects ! His wealth is conditioned by so many factors. But the Christian is to have a different perspective. The Lord Jesus said, "*a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.*" (Lk 12:15) Yet to look at most of us you would think it did. My which world are we living for ? Are you living for heaven or earth ? For the temporal or the eternal ? For self or God ?

Do you recall the time when you were like the brother of "*low decree* ?" Do you remember when you were materially stretched but spiritually keen ? Then you would never miss your time with the Lord, you would never have missed the prayer meeting, then you had a passion for the lost. Time went by, and the Lord has blessed you materially, now you're like the man with plenty, but tell me, are you as spiritually keen ? Paul writing to Timothy says, "*Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.*" (1 Tim 6:17) (1) (2)

(3) REJOICE IN THE MIDST OF PRESSURE

You see, in (1:9) the poor believer can rejoice, in (1:10) the rich believer can rejoice, and now in (1:12) the tested believer can rejoice. The word "*temptation,*" is better translated "*trial.*" Temptations are sent by Satan to make the Christian stumble, trials are sent by God to make the Christian stand. James says, "*Blessed, happy is the person who perseveres under trial, who stands his ground.*" Now why can we rejoice in the midst of pressure ? Because of:

(a) THE PURPOSE GOD HAS IN THE PRESENT:

Look at two words in (1:12) The word "*endureth,*" means "*staying power.*" Perseverance is the response of the person who bears up under stressful circumstances. The word "*tried,*" we have seen before (1:3) it conveys the picture of a precious metal being heated until it is liquid and its impurities rise to the top and are scraped off. Only pure metal is left. My do you recognise that your trials are for a purpose ? Is God placing you in the melting pot to remove the dross, to make you more like Christ ? We can rejoice (a)

(b) THE PROSPECT GOD HAS IN THE FUTURE:

For what a prospect, what a reward for the believer who perseveres under trial, "*the crown of life.*" In the ancient Grecian games a wreath was placed on the victors head as a sign of honour and victory. This "*crown,*" (*stephanos*) is what Paul had in mind when he wrote in one of his last letters to Timothy, "*I have a good fight His appearing.*" (2 Tim 4:7-8) Here James says that the Christian who perseveres under trial, will when Christ returns receive "*the crown of life.*" Polycarp was a disciple of John the

apostle and was burnt at the stake in Smyrna in 156 AD. The authorities offered to save his life if he would curse Christ. But old Polycarp replied, “ *Eighty and six years have I served Him and He hath done me no harm, how then can I blaspheme My King who saved me.*” My on that future day will you receive the “ *crown of life,*” because you patiently endured for Him ?

Paul says, “ *Rejoice in the Lord always,*” James says rejoice in the midst of (1) (2) (3) Two old friends lay dying, one was a rich but unsaved man, the other a poor believer. Talking to his visitor about his friend, the unsaved man said, “ *When I die I shall leave my riches, when he dies he will go to his.*” Is that not the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian ? My here above all is the reason for our rejoicing. In the words of the hymn-writer, “ *The bride eyes not her garment*” Does that not make you “ *lift up your heart, lift up your voice, rejoice again I say rejoice ?*”