

“Count it All Joy”—James 1:2-4

The world is in full-on retreat mode. Because of the covid-19 pandemic the nations around the globe are in full-scale retreat; withdrawing, drawing back into a posture of defense against the advances of this invisible enemy.

The picture that comes to my mind as I think about the world right now; certainly as I think of our own country and community, the picture that comes to mind is the picture of a turtle drawing in its legs and its head; withdrawing into the security of its shell.

Now, this is not a criticism. This posture of retreat, of withdrawal, of drawing back from mass gatherings of people, from none-essential businesses; the encouragement to avoid direct contact with people and to maintain “social distancing” is wise given what we know or, actually, what we don’t know about this virus.

I’m simply saying that all of these measures paint a picture of the world in retreat; the society of mankind in withdrawal; drawing back from their eager ambitions; from their seemingly endless pursuits, their quest to progress into a mode of protection; a defensive mode.

In the midst of this, it is important for us to remember that God is never in retreat; that God never draws back; God never withdraws into a posture of defense. Rather, God is always advancing. God is always pressing forward. God is always extending His kingdom purposes, extending the reach of His kingdom, even doing so in and through this present global withdrawal. God is always extending the reach of His kingdom; extending the breadth of that reach extending; the depth of that reach.

In the present situation God is extending the breadth of the reach of His kingdom. The corona virus pandemic has created opportunities for the gospel to go out; openings for the gospel as God’s people respond to the situation and reach out to bring aid to those in need. On Thursday a Samaritan’s Purse airplane took off from the United States to transport two field hospitals to virus-stricken Italy.

Undoubtedly, with those two field hospitals goes a team of God's people equip, not only with medical supplies, but also with the gospel. Only eternity will fully reveal how God's kingdom reach extended through those efforts.

And that's just one example. In a myriad of less spectacular ways God's kingdom is extending its breadth through the labors of gospel believers. Even in this time of withdrawal God is extend the breadth of His kingdom reach.

He is also extending the depth of that reach. In these extraordinary times God is working in the lives of His people, working the reach of His kingdom purposes; working the truth of the gospel, the truth of Jesus Christ, more deeply into the lives of His children. In and through this time of global retreat God is growing His people. He is advancing his kingdom purposes in their lives; working the truth of Jesus Christ more fully, more firmly, into their minds and hearts and wills.

God is advancing the reach of His kingdom in *your* life. He is working the truth of Jesus Christ more deeply in *you*; in your *mind*, in your *heart*, in your *will*. God is growing.

We need this reminder. We need to bear this in mind, because the temptation is to begin to adopt the mindset of the world around us; like them, to retreat into a mental posture of defense; to think, primarily, even exclusively, only in terms of safety, of security; to think only in these terms.

Now, of course, it is good for us, it is right that we should remember that we are secure, that we are safe, that in Christ God is our refuge and strength, a present help in trouble. it is good, it is right to remember, to call to mind, that nothing can separate us from His love to us in Christ; that we have a rock, a refuge, a fortress in our God.

However, with that in mind, we also need to be mindful—in these challenging times in which our security in God is so meaningful to us—that God's purposes are advancing. We need to think, not only in terms of refuge, of our safety and security, but also, in terms of growing; in terms of God's kingdom purposes advancing in our lives; of God working the truth of Christ Jesus more deeply into our lives.

In view of this reality, James 1 has some particularly pertinent counsel for us; some instruction that is especially relevant to our present moment.

James is writing to God's people; to those who hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ (James 2;1). He identifies them specifically as "*the twelve tribes in the dispersion*" (James 1:1), by which He means, the people of God dispersed in the world, like sojourners in a foreign land.

In his letter, James addresses a number of pressing, practical issues and, essentially, calls his readers to wise living; to living with wisdom; wisdom defined by the truth as it is in Jesus.

Right out of the gate James gives his readers a general instruction; an instruction that is to shape their overall outlook and disposition as they persevere in their circumstances and face their challenges.

This instruction not only calls for a certain disposition, a certain attitude and response to their circumstances, it also implies a definite framework, a particular structure or paradigm within which these readers are operating and by which they are to understand their circumstances and respond to them.

And, this instruction also implies that there is a particular outcome, a particular aim or objective or goal that they are pursuing; not only in their *present* circumstances but in all of life.

James' instructions are pertinent, they are relevant to us because we belong to the same company of people as the one He is addressing in his letter. We are the 21st century version of the twelve tribes in the dispersion; the people of God; those who hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

So, let's look at these instructions and see what they say to us, how they encourage us and challenge us in our present moment; especially as we think of the advancing kingdom purposes of God.

James 1:1-4—"*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

As we look at these instructions the first thing we note is their context. **These instructions are given in the context of trials.** The milieu into which James speaks is a milieu of trials.

Why do I say that? I say that because of the way James launches his letter. He launches this communication by addressing the issue of trials. Immediately after having addressed them and greeted them James declares, *“Count it all joy my brothers, whenever you encounter trials of various kinds.”* To go so immediately to the issue of trials suggests that the immediate circumstance of his readers, the big picture for his readers, the reality that summarily captures the gist of their experience is the reality of trials. Their immediate circumstance is the experiencing of trials. Various kinds of trials is the character the big picture of their lives as sojourners in the foreign land of this world.

Now, this is not to say that they never know times free from trial; times of peace; times of pleasure. But it is to say that peace and pleasure (temporal) are not the big picture of their experience. These are not the words that capture the general character of their lives. Rather, those words would be trials; testing.

And not just any trials; not just the trials the difficulties that normally accompany life in this sin-stricken world, but, rather the trials, the testings specifically related to their identity as the dispersed people of God; trials and testings specifically related to their identity as those who hold the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ; things such as the opposition, even open persecution, from an unbelieving and hostile world; as well as issues and situations related to their faithfulness to the faith; situations and circumstances that tempt, that try their faithfulness to Christ; situations and circumstances in which the passions of their sinful nature arise—are aroused; passions such as pride, fear, impatience, greed, covetousness—etc.

That James leads off with this word concerning trials strongly suggests that trials are the context of these instructions.

Now, James issues a call in this context of trials. James calls his readers to a specific, a particular response in this context of trials. What is that call? To what does James call his readers? The call is to count the encounter with trials as all joy. James calls his readers to consider their encounter with trials nothing but joy.

vs.2—“Count it all joy, my brothers, whenever you meet trials of various kinds.”

Count it all joy. Count the encounter with trials *nothing* but joy. That’s the call. Whenever any trial arises, whenever you encounter a trial, whenever anything arises to occasion your testing, James says, reckon it nothing but joy. When your unbelieving neighbor ridicules you or openly harasses you because you hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ, count it nothing but joy. When that frustrating co-worker rubs you the wrong way and you feel your impatience rising, count it nothing but joy. When the economy slows because of the covid-19 shutdowns and you feel yourself beginning to become anxious about what may come, whether you will lose your job, how you will pay the bill, count it nothing but joy,

“Count it all joy, my brothers whenever you meet trials of various kinds.”

Now, let me ask you, does that make sense to you? Do you understand that instruction?

On its face, it doesn’t make sense. It seems crazy.

So, how do we make sense out of it? Obviously, there must be sense in this instruction. This is the Spirit-inspired Word of God after all. So, how do we make sense out of this? What would make sense of this call? What would make this call make sense?

This call could only make sense if we were operating within a certain framework; if we were working with a certain paradigm, a particular code, a code in which trials were actually good; in which they were advantageous; beneficial. Only with such a code would this call make sense.

Is there such a code? Is there such a paradigm; a framework? Obviously, the answer is—yes.

And, what is that framework? What is that paradigm, that code? That code is—the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ is the code behind this call. The faith of our Lord Jesus Christ is the paradigm, the framework within which James’ readers are operating; the framework, the paradigm within

which this call is issued; the paradigm, the framework that makes this call make sense.

The faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ is the code according to which these ones are living; the framework within which they are encountering these various trials.

James' readers are those who hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This faith is a whole complex of truth, a whole body of truths, of realities, that they understand, that they affirm, that inform their lives, that has implications for their lives, for how they live, how they think, how they love, how they behave. This faith, this body of truth is defined by Jesus Christ; by His person and His work. This faith is the truth as it is in Jesus. This faith, this body of truth is *embodied* in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the personification of this truth, of this faith. In a very real sense, Jesus Christ *IS* this faith that they hold. Jesus Christ *IS* this body of realities, this code according to which they live.

And, that being the case, the objective, the aim, the goal for these ones who hold the faith of the Lord, Jesus Christ is to like *HIM*. Their goal, their aim, their objective is conformity to Christ; formation the likeness of who He is and what He has accomplished.

And it is this, this goal, this aim, this objective, the goal of the code according to which they are living, it is this that makes sense of this call; the call to consider it nothing but joy whenever they encounter various trials.

Now, how does this work? How does this goal of conformity to Christ make sense out of the call to consider the encounter of trials nothing but joy?

The goal of the code makes sense out of the call when we understand that it is the trials that they encounter that form the instrument that works the goal of likeness to Christ into their lives. The goal of the code makes sense of the call when we understand that it is in and by and through the trials that we conformed to Christ. The trials and testings that they encounter are the crucible in which the likeness of Christ, in which conformity to Christ, conformity to the faith is forged in us; is worked into and worked out of their lives. Like gold in the refiners cauldron. It is the heat in the cauldron that forms the gold into pure gold; that refines away the imperfections so that the gold is *true* gold; *truly* gold; gold through and through. The heat *tries* the gold, it *tests* the gold with the result that

the gold is purified; the gold is proven; the gold is *approved*; proven through and through to be gold.

As believers, as those who hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have a goal; we have an aim; an objective. That objective, that aim, that goal does not consist of anything in this world. It is not defined by anything temporal or material. Our goal is not a particular socio-economic status with its accompanying standard of living. Our goal is not some particular standing on the corporate ladder or position in our social circles. As those who hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ, our goal in this life has nothing to do with any of those things. Our goal is not temporal or material. It is goal is spiritual. It is eternal. Our goal is defined by Jesus Christ. Our goal consists of likeness to Him.

Now, this is not to say that we do not have goals and ambitions with respect to this in this world. Not at all. Having goals, having ambitions, rightly defined and determined, is part of good stewardship in this life. But, it is to say, that these are not the things that form or constitute our *ultimate* goals. These things are not ends in themselves. They are means to an end; the greater end of conformity to Christ.

As those who hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ, our goal is to be like Him to Jesus Christ. And, we rejoice over anything and everything that can work that likeness into us; anything and everything that can shape us more to be like Him; anything and everything that can further our conformity to Christ

By the grace of God, through the power of the Spirit, trials and testings can do that. By the grace of God, through the power of the Spirit, trials and testings work the likeness of Christ into us and out of us. That is essentially what James is saying in vs.3 when He says, "*For the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*" The testing of our faith produces the steadfastness, the perseverance, the fortitude to endure that enables us to carry on through the trial so that we can realize its effect; namely, the likeness of Christ formed in us.

So, to summarize so far, the code makes sense of the call. The code is the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That code has a goal, namely, conformity to Christ. Trials are the crucible in which conformity to Christ is forged into our lives. Therefore, we count it nothing but joy whenever we encounter trials. We consider it *all* joy when trials of various kinds come our way. Make sense?

In view of this, James issues a command—**vs.4,**

“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

In other words, “Keep on keeping on!” Persevere through the trials, press on through the testings, until you reach the goal; ‘til you are fully mature; perfect, complete, lacking nothing of the faith formed in you; of Christ forged in you.

The world is in retreat. But God is not! His kingdom purposes continue to advance. He is extending the reach of his kingdom; extending its breadth; extending its depth. Even in the midst of this global retreat God is advancing the breadth of the reach of his Kingdom as the gospel goes out through the faithful efforts of His people. Even in the midst of this global retreat God is advancing the depth of the reach of his Kingdom as the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ is worked more deeply into the lives of His people; those who hold that faith. By the trials that come God is extending the reach of his Kingdom into your life, working towards a fuller, firmer faithfulness to Christ; a greater, more glorious conformity to Christ. For that reason, we do not draw back. We do not retreat into a shell of safety and security. Confident of our refuge in Christ we press on, looking forward, expecting God to grow, anticipating that God will grow us in likeness to Christ. Trials, tests, challenges are the instrument he uses to work that likeness into us; they are the crucible in which He forges conformity to Christ in us.

Therefore, we persevere in our trials, considering it *nothing* but joy when they come along.