

A SPIRIT OF REJOICING

The Book of Philippians #18

According to the Random House Dictionary the definition of joy is “the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying; a source of keen pleasure or delight.” To rejoice is to “feel great joy”.

When a child is born or when someone gets married we find an occasion to rejoice. When someone loses a job but quickly finds another we rejoice with them. When our children graduate from high school and college we rejoice by throwing parties in their honor. Kids rejoice over presents, over getting their driver’s license and over leaving the house. Adults also rejoice when the kids leave the house and don’t return except for visits. They also rejoice over simpler things like having food on the table and maintaining good health as they age.

For some joy comes easily. For others it takes a lot to make them joyful. For some the simple things in life bring great joy. For others it takes a monumental event before joy is realized. But whether simple or complex, whether immediate or over time, joy comes to all of us at one time or another.

Scripture records many things that are or were a cause for rejoicing. According to Luke 15:10 a repentant sinner is a cause for rejoicing, for it says, “*there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*” We know that there was joy when the wise men saw the star over the place where Jesus lay because Scripture says “*they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy*” (Matthew 2:10). And when the women went to the place where Jesus was laid after his death they also had great joy. What caused their joy was seeing the empty tomb and hearing from an angel that Jesus was alive. And Scripture says, “*they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples*” (Matthew 28:8).

Jesus speaks of rejoicing in his parables when he speaks of the lost sheep and the lost coin being found and the return of the prodigal son (Luke 15:6, 9, 32). When Phillip went to the city of Samaria and proclaimed Christ the Scripture says, “*There was much rejoicing in that city.*” Why? Because many had unclean spirits cast out of them and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.

From these Scriptures we see that rejoicing is a good thing, that it comes as a result of some positive event and that these events fill us with happiness and delight. Even Paul speaks of rejoicing in the first verse of chapter three in the book of Philippians.

PHILIPPIANS 3:1

“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write these same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.”

By saying he is writing “these same things again” Paul is inferring that he has previously spoken of rejoicing in the Lord. He could be referring to letters he wrote to others because he speaks of rejoicing in his writings to the Colossians, Thessalonians, and Corinthians. Since these letters would have been circulated among all the churches, including the Philippian church, the Philippians would have been familiar with these letters as well. Here is a sample.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16

“Rejoice always.”

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11

“Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

So we see that Paul addressed the subject of rejoicing in his other letters and this may be what he means by saying it is no trouble to write these same things again. But if we look back at the first two chapters of Philippians we can see that Paul has already used the word “rejoice” four times in the first two chapters. So by saying he has no trouble repeating himself he may be referring to this same latter rather than referring to other letters.

In chapter one of Philippians he speaks of those who are preaching Christ in order to bring him distress while he is in prison. In verse 18 his response to this was, *“Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.”* In chapter two he uses the word “rejoice” three times, once in the context of the return of Epaphroditus to the Philippians where they would rejoice in seeing him again. The other two times he refers to suffering. It is here that Paul adds a new dimension to the word rejoice.

PHILIPPIANS 2:17-18

“Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.”

So rejoicing is certainly a theme which Paul refers to often in his letters. And there are several things which are a cause of rejoicing for Paul – as mentioned before the preaching of the gospel was certainly one of them.

PHILIPPIANS 1:18

“Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.”

And to hear good reports from the churches he founded was a cause of rejoicing for him.

ROMANS 16:19

“For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you.”

But the primary focus of Paul’s rejoicing in all his letters was rejoicing over suffering for the sake of Christ. And not only was Paul suffering this but all of the churches to whom Paul wrote were suffering from persecution. Yet Paul consistently says to *“rejoice”* and to do so *“in the Lord”*.

This is not the kind of thing which we associate with rejoicing. After all suffering may fill us with a great emotion but the one that comes to mind is not great joy. Yet Paul says we are to rejoice in our suffering. Paul will speak of rejoicing again in chapter four but for now let’s understand why rejoicing in the midst of persecution was important to Paul and why he had no trouble writing the same thing again and again to those who, like him, were suffering for their faith.

To do so we need to go backwards a bit to a time shortly after Pentecost. We’ll concern ourselves with the apostles and the start of the church in Jerusalem. The apostles were the first to suffer persecution for their faith, not Paul. Remember, Paul was actually persecuting Christians before he met Christ on the road to Damascus. We are told of the first persecution of Christians in Acts chapter four.

Peter and John were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. The

priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them and were greatly disturbed by this message. So they laid hands on them and put them in prison. The next day they were brought before the Council and questioned. They recognized them as being with Jesus and were amazed at their confidence because they were uneducated and untrained men. So they simply told them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. When Peter and John refused they threatened them further but found no basis on which to punish them so they let them go.

When they returned to their companions the apostles prayed and asked the Lord to take note of their threats and grant them the ability to speak and heal with confidence. And the Lord granted their request. In Acts chapter five we read that at the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place. The sick were being carried out into the street so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them and people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits were all being healed.

This caused the high priest and the Sadducees to be filled with jealousy so they rose up and laid hands on the apostles again and put them in a public jail. Notice it does not say just Peter and John were arrested this time, it says the apostles were arrested. Was this all of them or just those whom they could get their hands on? We have no record of any of the apostles leaving Jerusalem until later after the great persecution had started (Acts 8:1) so they probably arrested all twelve of them. That must have been interesting.

In any event, during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison and they all walked out. When the high priest discovered this he sent his guards to look for them. They found them standing in the temple speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus, completely ignoring the request of the Council not to speak in that name. So the high priest had them rearrested and brought before the Council. After some deliberations they sought advice from Gamaliel, a Pharisee and teacher of the law who was respected by all the people. This was the result.

ACTS 5:40-42

They took (Gamaliel's) advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

So the Council made good on their threats and had the apostles flogged before releasing them. And what was the response of the apostles to their flogging? They rejoiced because they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. Not that is an interesting concept – to be considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

When we were young and we spilt up into two groups to be picked for teams we got nervous because we might be the last one picked – the one considered the least worthy of being on someone's team. But when we were picked as one of the first ones to be on a team we rejoiced because someone thought we had something valuable to bring to their team, they considered us worthy of their trust. When we grew up and got singled out for a raise over our fellow employees we rejoiced because we were considered worthy over all others to get that raise.

Now these are all examples of receiving something positive as a result of being worthy. But what the apostles received was not positive. They received incarceration and physical harm. In the eyes of the public this was an indication of shame not favor. Yet the apostles considered these negative events as

being favored, or set apart by God to suffer for His name. To them it was an honor and a privilege to be considered worthy of the shame they suffered.

Wow. Not sure I would have had the same response to being jailed and flogged as they did. But I believe Paul had this same mindset. He was rejoicing in his persecution and he told his readers to rejoice with him because their joint suffering was considered a sign that they were worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ.

For us this would appear to be an unusual thing - to rejoice in suffering. We in America do our best to avoid suffering of any kind. Suffering for us is when the water takes too long to get hot or when the clothes in the dryer take too long to dry. We are impatient, we are in a hurry. We are used to microwaves and “instant ons” and automatic deposits and Netflix on demand. Suffering for anything for any length of time is something which we have built into our modern world to avoid. And these are just little irritants. I haven’t even begun to address physical suffering.

When I was being picked on in high school, thrown against the lockers and randomly punched because I was different from others, I did not consider it something to be happy about; When people disagreed with me I did not consider that something that brought me great joy; When my teachers unfairly graded me because of my point of view I did not consider that a compliment; When my employer passed me over for a raise or promotion because of their dislike for me, I did not consider that a moment of rejoicing. Yet we are told to rejoice when we suffer for the name of Christ because we are being considered worthy to suffer for His name.

It is an unusual thing for the world to rejoice over their personal suffering at the hands of others. The world’s response is to eventually retaliate and destroy the reputation or the property of the offenders. But rejoicing over suffering is the expectation our Father places on us. True, it is the subject of our suffering that is at the heart of the matter here. Suffering for doing something wrong is not a cause of rejoicing but a cause for repentance. But for us, suffering for Christ is what is to be the impetus for our rejoicing.

And we are not just told to rejoice when we suffer but are also told that when we suffer we are being blessed. Now rejoicing over suffering is one thing but in my mind being blessed because of it is a whole other ball game. Yet both Jesus and Peter say we are blessed when we are being persecuted for the sake of Christ.

MATTHEW 5:10-12

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

1 Peter 3:14-17

“Even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed, and do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the things in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.”

These Scriptures not only tell us that we are blessed when we suffer persecution but they also tell us why we should rejoice over it. This blessing is proof that the kingdom of heaven is ours and that our reward in heaven is great.

So if we are blessed when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, and insulted and falsely accused of evil because of our belief in Christ, how are we to rejoice? What form does our rejoicing take when in the midst of actual persecution? Since Paul gives us this admonition let's see how he put his own words into practice.

During their first visit to Philippi, Paul and Silas went down to the place of prayer by the river and on the way they met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination. After the slave-girl consistently cried out over the course of many days Paul commanded the spirit to leave which it did at that very moment. This angered her masters so they seized Paul and Silas, dragged them into the marketplace, and brought them to the chief magistrates accusing them of throwing the entire city into confusion. After beating Paul and Silas the magistrates threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. Not exactly something to be rejoicing over is it? Yet Scripture says,

ACTS 16:25

"...about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

Paul was putting his thoughts and words into action. Is this what you would have done? Would you have started singing after you had been beaten, thrown in prison and had your feet put in stocks? Not a natural response to this unusual circumstance. Yet this is what Paul did and what he asks us to do. And he knows what he is talking about. These are not just sermon points to him, not just fancy words in a letter. These are his life experiences, as well as those of his fellow apostles.

In a very small way I experienced what Paul is saying when he says to rejoice in the midst of our suffering. I was not being persecuted for my faith but I was experiencing grief. My mother died somewhat suddenly on a Saturday afternoon. The next morning I had a choice to stay home or go to church. I was the worship leader and had responsibilities on Sunday morning but I could easily have not gone and everyone would have understood.

But I wanted to go. I wanted to be in the house of the Lord and sing praises to God. My heart was hurting but I needed to go to the place of comfort. I needed to sing songs of praise to my God in the midst of my sadness. I needed to feel His presence and I wanted Him to know that I loved Him in spite of my loss. So I went. And I sang. Through a heart heavy with grief I rejoiced in the Lord that morning for His faithfulness and His kindness to me, and for His unfailing love. Not nearly as dramatic a scenario as Paul but it allowed me to better understand what motivated him to sing hymns of praise to God in the midst of his suffering.

So Paul, coming from his own personal experience, tells us to rejoice in the midst of our suffering. And Peter chimes in here as well but adds another aspect to this suffering. He tells us we should not be surprised when these trials come upon us as if it were a strange thing to suffer for Christ.

1 PETER 4:12-13

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of

Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”

And why should we be surprised? Jesus told us that if they persecuted Him they would also persecute us (John 15:20). So we should expect to experience the same opposition that Jesus Himself experienced. In fact Jesus said to His disciples, *“These things I have spoken to you, so that when (the hour of persecution comes), you may remember that I told you of them.”*

So both Jesus and Peter tell us to not be surprised when we suffer for Christ. But Peter also tells us the purpose of this suffering. He says it comes upon us for our testing. But what is the purpose of the test? To answer that question let’s look Deuteronomy and Hebrews.

DEUTERONOMY 8:2

“You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.”

HEBREWS 12:3, 7, 10b-11

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart....It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?...He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

HEBREWS 5:8

“Although He was a Son, (Jesus) learned obedience from the things which He suffered.”

The purpose of suffering is to determine what is in our heart; to see whether or not we will keep God’s word. It is also a form of discipline, a training in righteousness for the purpose of learning obedience.

This is what it means to be considered worthy to suffer for the sake of Christ. God tests us and allows us to suffer for His sake in order to teach us obedience, to see whether or not we will keep His commandments. He treats us as his children and disciplines us as necessary in order to train us in the ways of righteousness that we might bear the fruit of righteousness.

Will we cling to Him or forsake Him when persecution comes? This is the test. We may not know how we would respond until the time actually comes but we would all like to think that we would never deny Christ. But we may be like Peter who said to Jesus at the Last Supper, *“I will lay down my life for you”* (John 13:37) then, a few hours later, sitting around a fire in the court of the high priest after Jesus was arrested, he denied he even knew Him (John 13:37; 18:25-27).

One doesn’t always know how one will respond to persecution. But even Peter was forgiven and lived to serve Christ so faithfully that, as we have seen, he too suffered for His faith. And through his experiences with suffering he was able to write in his first letter that we should consider ourselves blessed when people revile us because we belong to Christ.

1 PETER 4:14, 19

“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ...Therefore those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”

Peter also tells us what the end result or the purpose of going through this suffering is. And James echoes his words.

1 PETER 1:5-7

“(We) are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

JAMES 1:2-4

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

1 PETER 5:10

“After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”

These Scriptures tell us that suffering produces endurance and the end result of endurance is perfection and completion so that we are lacking in nothing. When James says to *“let endurance have its perfect result”* he means that we are to cooperate with God in the process. It is God who performs this work within us and it is through our faith that we are protected by His power. Our endurance is the proof of our faith and this proof will result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Christ to the world.

It is God who will perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish us. To perfect is to repair or make complete; to confirm is to make stable or firm; to strengthen is to make strong, referring to our soul, not our body; and to establish is to lay the foundation or to be grounded. So what James and Peter are saying is that after we have endured suffering for a little while God will repair anything that has become weak. He will strengthen it and reestablish its power so that our soul will not be weakened but stay grounded in the bedrock of God’s word.

Paul has told us to rejoice. He has said so repeatedly and Peter echoes this view. James also tells us to count it all joy when we encounter these trials and Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we suffer for His name’s sake. So if the purpose of suffering for Christ is our perfection - if the purpose is to make us strong and plant us firmly on solid ground - then we have a reason to rejoice, we have a reason to count it all joy because there is a purpose for suffering. God will make something good out of something terrible.

But most of us are disconnected from this process of being made complete because, though we profess a desire to be perfected and a desire to stand more firmly in our faith, we do not desire to suffer in order to achieve it. We avoid suffering whenever possible and we grumble and complain when we do suffer. We do not speak of Christ because we may be challenged or embarrassed and unable to defend ourselves. We frequently believe more strongly in our own inadequacies than in the power of Christ residing within us. As a result we avoid suffering for Him and avoid the perfection this suffering brings. Are all called to suffer for His name’s sake to the degree that Peter and Paul did? No. Peter tells us that our suffering for Christ will come about *“if God should will it”* (1 Peter 3:17). But that should not prevent us from speaking out our faith because we fear the suffering it might bring. For Peter also tells us to:

1 PETER 3:15

“Sanctify Christ in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.”

We are to be ready to speak of Christ and the hope which we have in him. It may be getting increasingly tense to speak of faith in America but here it is nothing like other countries. How would we do in another country? Hopefully we would not be foolish and openly invite persecution. After all, even our ancestors in the faith met secretly and in caves to avoid detection by those seeking to harm them. And Scripture tells us that as a result of the leader’s plot to kill Him, Jesus stopped His public ministry among the people. He left Jerusalem and went to a place near the wilderness staying there with His disciples to temporarily keep Himself hidden from His accusers (John 11:53-54; 12:36).

But God continues to give opportunity to speak of Him and we should be quick to seize that opportunity and not shy away from it because we are timid. There may come a day, perhaps not that far away, where standing up for Christ will come at a cost. But today that cost is small compared to our brothers and sisters around the world who are being killed, tortured, burned alive and beheaded because they stand boldly for Christ. Even if all we do here is live a righteous life and speak only words that edify and build others up, someone will eventually ask us what makes us different from others. It is then that we must be ready to give an answer as to why we see and handle things differently.

When I worked for Bank of America as a check encoder we had deadlines that must be met. All deposits and checks as well as the loan documents that were signed that day had to go out of the branch by a certain time, usually around 6pm; whatever was not in placed in a bag ready for pickup would not be processed that night. If it was not processed that night then the next day we would have angry customers wondering why their checks bounced when they had made a deposit the previous day. So we scrambled hard to make that deadline. When there was any delay in getting items to us for encoding it caused a lot of stress on the check encoders to make sure everything already received was encoded along with these additional late arriving items.

On one particular occasion there were three of us encoding items. It was a particularly heavy volume day and we were rushing to get everything encoded before the deadline. About 5 minutes before the deadline a person comes in and hands us a stack of work. Immediately one of the encoders flew off the handle and yelled at her. She was very stressed and took it out on the other employees. I had completed my work so I calmly told the stressed out employee to hand me the work and that I would encode it. I then went to work and finished the job just as the pickup person arrived.

This was not an unusual situation for any of us. People would either forget to bring us their work or we were so busy we could not do a last minute run to their stations to ensure we had everything. But what made this situation unusual was not what happened that day but what happened a few days later. The third employee who encoded items with me and the stressed out employee had paid attention to the difference between how I handled the late work and how the other employee handled it. And she asked me how I did it? How could I remain calm and not get as upset as the other employee had? In essence she was asking me to give an account for the hope within me.

As we conversed she shared the struggles that she, her husband, and her son were going through. To make a long story short out of this conversation and because of that stressful incident I met with her whole family and they all became believers. So, even though the rejoicing came after the suffering, here is an example of being able to rejoice over a time of stress and testing. God will bring good out of every situation no matter how small or how great the suffering is. The point of Paul’s admonition to rejoice in

the midst of suffering is to look not at the current circumstances but to look at the good that God will bring out of it.

We have been talking about rejoicing in our sufferings and in our trials. But I need to make one more thing clear. While it is true that there is suffering in sickness and in lingering illness, Paul and Peter are not addressing sickness. They are speaking of suffering for the sake of Christ and sharing in His sufferings. And how did Christ suffer? He had many people revile his name and speak all manner of evil against Him. He was beaten and scourged and hung on a cross to die because people were threatened by His words and by His deeds. But there is no record of His ever suffering from sickness.

So this suffering refers to physical and reputational suffering and it comes about as a result of speaking and teaching in the name of the Lord. This suffering comes at the hands of others. Even in the midst of forty years of wandering in the wilderness God did not test them with sickness. He did punish them with plagues because of their disobedience, but He did not use sickness as means to test their faith. Even when He used hunger to test them He provided food for them in the form of manna from heaven.

And neither is James referring to sickness when tells us to count it all joy when we encounter various trials. In this context he is referring to temptations which try to drive us off course and divert our attention away from the Lord. These temptations can come through both internal and external means. In other words they can come as a result of our being carried away and enticed by our own lusts (James 1:14), or they can come from the tempter himself like the experience Jesus had with the devil in the wilderness after 40 days of fasting. This suffering is common to all men and God has promised that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able, but with the temptation will provide a way of escape also, so that we may be endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

When God called Paul to the ministry He said He would show Paul how much he must suffer for His name's sake (Acts 9:16). And what was the suffering that Paul endured? 2 Corinthians chapter 11 gives us the answer.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:24-27

“Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and in thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

Notice, Paul makes no mention of sickness in his list of sufferings. In Galatians chapter 4 Paul does refer to his bodily condition and makes reference to his eyes. But it is in the context of his preaching and the love the Galatians had for him not as something he suffered for the sake of Christ (though his vision problems may have been the result of his frequent beatings and imprisonment since he had been stoned and left for dead at one point in his life).

Even when Paul spoke of the thorn in the flesh he experienced as a result of the visions he had he did not speak of sickness and some have suggested. Rather he spoke of the messenger of Satan that was given to him to torment him in order to keep him from exalting himself (2 Corinthians 12:7). And what was the result of all this suffering? How did Paul let the endurance he experienced have its perfect result? He tells us a few verses later.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:8-10

“Concerning this (messenger of Satan) I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weakness, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Once again Paul does not speak of sickness in the context of suffering for Christ. He speaks of insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ’s sake but not sickness. In other words he experienced these things because of the work He did for Christ. The sufferings which Paul experienced may have included many if not all the things which Christ revealed to him at the beginning of his ministry. But whether the list contains everything Christ revealed to him or not this fact remains. He suffered much and so did his fellow believers to whom he was writing.

I make mention of this because we need to understand that the process of perfection which both Peter and James speak of comes about because of our suffering for Christ and our enduring the temptations of life, not because of sickness. If enduring sickness is the method which God uses to perfect us, then Jesus would not have gone about healing everyone because He would have been interfering with God’s plan of perfection in the individual. If their sickness was supposed to be their method of finding completion and perfection, then Jesus would not have interfered with that process.

Since Jesus only said and did what the Father told Him to say and do, then healing people of was the will of God. If God’s will had been to perfect these people through their sickness or physical deformity, then God would not have allowed Jesus to heal them. He would have let them suffer until they were complete, lacking in nothing.

This is not to say that suffering from sickness cannot be used as a test of faith. Job is the prime example of God not only testing someone in the area of loss of family and possessions but also in sickness. After allowing Satan to have all of Job’s oxen, donkeys, camels and sheep either killed or stolen and his sons and daughters and servants killed Job responded by saying, *“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”* Not satisfied with this answer Satan once again seeks to get Job to curse God. We read about this in Job chapter two.

JOB 2:4-7

“Satan challenged God by saying, ‘Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and flesh; he will curse you to Your face.’ So the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.’ Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head.”

And what was Job’s reply to this?

JOB 2:10

“Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?”

And the Scripture goes on to say, *“In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”*

Job certainly suffered because of his faith. God even pointed him out to Satan as an example of a man with strong faith - a blameless and upright man, who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:18). It was because of his strong faith that Satan asked permission to test him.

Did Job rejoice in the midst of his suffering? He may not have demonstrated it quite like Paul and Peter did but his response of submission to the Lord's will shows his willingness to accept whatever the hand of the Lord had for him. For he said, "Even if he slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). Job trusted the Lord to deliver him either from this sickness or from this life. He had the same mindset that Paul had when he said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

This may seem a little contradictory but my point is this. When Paul refers to suffering he is not referring to sickness. He is referring to being persecuted for believing and teaching about the name of Jesus. Certainly everything in life that happens to us tests our belief system. We do not need to be persecuted for our faith to be tested. Even in our sickness we are challenged with maintaining a trusting attitude toward God. But Jesus tells us that persecution, not sickness, will come to all who believe in Him. And Paul says that when it comes we should rejoice in the Lord. We may not be happy or full of positive emotions when we are persecuted for the sake of the gospel of Christ. But we can rejoice in the Lord. We can know that whether we live through it or die because of it we have an eternal home awaiting us. And we can trust our souls to a faithful Creator.

1 PETER 4:16-19

"If anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for the judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, those who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."

So if God should so will any of us to suffer for His name's sake we must consider the words of Paul and rejoice in the midst of it. It matters not whether we sing songs or pray or remain silent in the face of accusations as Jesus did (Mark 15:4-5). What does matter is that we hold fast to our faith and that we rejoice in the knowledge that God will never leave us or forsake us. Even if the worse were to happen to us we have the security of knowing that there is a place reserved for us in heaven. Our name is written in the Book of Life. And our Lord has gone before us to prepare a place for us.

We may be tested but this test is for our refinement, not for our detriment. His plans for us are for good and not for evil, to give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 39:11). If God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? We may suffer for the sake of Christ but if we do experience suffering then let us trust our souls to a faithful Creator to what is right for us. If we do this then we may find that it is not so difficult to find a reason to rejoice even in the midst of our suffering.