



FEED MY SHEEP

PUBLISHED BY DR. JAMES W. BRUGGEMAN
STONE KINGDOM MINISTRIES
P. O. BOX 5695
ASHEVILLE, NC 28813 U.S.A.

See my blog at www.stonekingdom.org

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Four keys to make you a joyful Christian

The fruit of joy, part 4 — conclusion

Allow me to repeat a sentence or two from the end of last month's FMS: Life will be one trial after another. But do you know what? It will be one trial after another whether you are a Christian or not. The difference is that when you are a Christian you begin to understand the purpose of suffering and thereby we are, or should be, better able to endure life's hardships. Because we have the assurance of eternal life, that our names are written in heaven, as it were. The writings of the New Testament are replete with passages telling believers of rejoicing in their trials. Let's look at some of them for our learning and edification, shall we? In 2 Corinthians 7:4, Paul speaks of joy in tribulation.

2 Corinthians 7:4 Great *is* my boldness of speech toward you, great *is* my glorying of you: I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation.

How could he be? How can we be joyful in our tribulations? Back up one chapter to...

2 Corinthians 6:1 We then, *as* workers together *with him*, beseech *you* also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.

2 (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.)

3 Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed:

4 But in all *things* approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses,

Pause a moment: when Paul says "approving ourselves," it is not a prideful statement. It means that he and the other ministers do minister in such a way so as to exhibit themselves, to show themselves, to prove themselves as true ministers of God. Let us back up a phrase or two...

5 In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings;

6 By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned,

7 By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,

8 By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and *yet* true;

9 As unknown, and *yet* well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed;

10 As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and *yet* possessing all things.

Verse 6 said: "by longsuffering." Let's put some terms on the table: Patience, perseverance, longsuffering and forbearance. Patience is virtually synonymous with perseverance. Forbearance and longsuffering seem to me to be virtually synonymous. Longsuffering is part of patience. It is one aspect of patience.

But longsuffering refers specifically to tolerating the abuses of others. Let me say it another way. Longsuffering is the indulgence of those who injure us. It is the delay of resentment or punishment of those who

cause us suffering. It is the biblical response to those who offend us repeatedly. *It is the grace to suffer those wrongs without resentment or bitterness.*

Our opportunities to practice longsuffering are multitudinous. They would include scorn and ridicule, insults and practical jokes at your expense. Pranks which are malicious instead of funny. They usually point to a deep-seated emotional problem in the prankster, don't they? Hence, our need for the grace to display the fruit of longsuffering.

Remember, the key to longsuffering is to tolerate these things without resentment, without malice and without bitterness. Paul speaks much of longsuffering, but Peter also addresses this virtue when he counsels slaves who have harsh masters to endure with patience. He points them to the example of Christ enduring harsh treatment He did not deserve.

This is an important point about longsuffering that we should understand: I do not think that the Scriptures are teaching us that we are to remain in abusive relationships when we have the option to make changes. But as Peter's example shows, a slave was stuck. He could not simply change masters with no serious consequences.

So today, there are employer-employee relationships, but in almost all cases, there is always the option for an employee to make changes in his work situation so that he does not have to unnecessarily endure abuse at the hand of an employer.

In an abusive husband situation, a wife *may* be able to leave or divorce the abuser. However, it might not always be possible, especially if there are children involved. This might be a case where the fruit of longsuffering is developed.

And, of course, all the teaching we've done on the topic of forgiveness should be factored in here as well, so review those back issues of FMS or the full studies on CDs if need be. Think about this: if we find ourselves in a situation of learning patience through longsuffering, that is to say, that we are continually and unavoidably being mistreated by others, then truly our faith is being tested.

In the face of this trial, will we keep faith and trust in God? That He will not test us above what we are able to bear? That He will bring justice on the tor-

mentor? And by the way, do we pray that God will have mercy on him/them? Was this not the lesson of Joseph? Joseph learned patience through longsuffering and forbearance. He was unjustly enslaved. He was unjustly accused of rape. He was unjustly imprisoned for years. He could do nothing to change his situation. He even tried to effect his own release when the butler and baker were being released.

But ultimately he had to wait with the right spirit, the proper heart attitude, until God gave pharaoh a dream. It was totally out of Joseph's control. But when his time of testing was through, he came forth from the furnace of fire as purified gold. That is, he was a man of virtually pure golden character, a man possessed of the divine nature. My guess is that Joseph also learned to rejoice in his sufferings.

Repeated or continual abuse is one aspect of longsuffering. Another is provocation. The difference is that after provocation, we are not powerless to respond. We can get revenge, if we so choose. Provocation is where someone causes our anger to flare, and we run the risk of losing our temper. And we are not helpless; we *have* the ability to punish or exact revenge rapidly and harshly.

What is our response to be? Obviously, there are times when a measured response is called for, for righteousness' sake—*and when we have the proper authority to do so*. But in many other cases, we should learn patience from provocation. God is our example. The Bible describes Him as "slow to anger." The apostle James counsels us to do the same in...

James 1: 19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

Restraining our anger and wrath is manifesting the fruit of longsuffering and patience. It is an observable fact that some of us are more prone to losing our temper than others. If we may generalize and use a stereotype, I think it is true—for whatever reason—that red-haired people seem to have a shorter fuse. I don't know why; that's just the way it is. ☺ If you have a short fuse (red hair or not), then learning patience under provocation will be one of your special challenges to overcoming. *It is not okay for us to simply dismiss this trait* by saying "Well, that's just the way I am."

Yes, that is the way I am or the way you are; but we need not remain that way. Rather than saying "That's just the way I am," a short-tempered person needs to (1) acknowledge his temper as a sinful habit, and (2) beg God for His grace to be able to respond to provocations with longsuffering and patience, to become "slow to anger," even as our heavenly Father is.

When we learn through longsuffering to have a slow fuse, then we are learning to deal with those who provoke us in a manner which is both spiritually maturing for us and helps heal relationships rather than exacerbate poor relationships. The apostle James has more to say about joy in the midst of trials.

James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

3 Knowing this, that the trying [testing] of your faith worketh [produces] patience.

4 But let patience have *her* perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

When we lived in Florida back in the 1980s, we had built a home for our growing family. Not too long after we had furnished it, we were burglarized twice to the tune of thousands of dollars worth of our possessions, including a priceless necklace that belonged to Roxanne. Its intrinsic value was very small, but it was priceless because it was a family heirloom. Do you think I was provoked? Do you think I was a happy camper? ... which is the modern way of asking, do you think I was able to maintain Christian joy? After being robbed of our goods, I do not recall that I chanced upon this passage in the book of Hebrews, but I can certainly appreciate it now.

Hebrews 10: 30 For we know him that hath said, Vengeance *belongeth* unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people.

31 *It is* a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

32 But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions;

33 Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used.

34 For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

35 Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward.

Paul is commending these Christians who apparently had no sooner become believers than the bottom fell out in their lives. They were insulted, they were made a laughingstock, they were afflicted, and when they were robbed, they responded *with joy!*

Paul in 2 Corinthians speaks again of joy in the midst of trials, ...with an interesting result. I will read this verse in three different versions for the sake of clarity. The words are correct in the KJV, but it just doesn't quite communicate the idea to us clearly in our sound-bite generation.

2 Corinthians 8:2 How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.

NRS 2 Corinthians 8:2 for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

BBE 2 Corinthians 8:2 How while they were undergoing every sort of trouble, and were in the greatest need, they took all the greater joy in being able to give freely to the needs of others.

In other words, true biblical joy results in cheerful giving! How's your giving? Is it cheerfully given, or begrudgingly out of sense of duty? Guess which manner is pleasing to God? In his epistle to the Colossians, we will see that Paul again connects the ideas of longsuffering and patience with joy. I still can't believe it! There I was trying to avoid doing any teaching on patience and longsuffering, and so I choose to teach on joy (of my own free will, of course...not! ☺) and the Father blindsides me. It seems everywhere I look for joy, He says "longsuffering. Patience!" He's such a loving Father, isn't He?

Colossians 1: 9 For this cause we also, since the day we heard *it*, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual

understanding;

10 That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;

11 Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness;

Well, folks, it looks like we're stuck with the reality that joy is really all about patience and longsuffering! I guess it makes sense when you stop and think about it because it's easy to be glad and full of joy when everything is hunky-dorry in your life. But since we are striving to grow spiritually and attain to overcomership, then it follows that the big test is maintaining joy in the midst of trials and even outright persecution. Paul and Barnabas did it.

Acts 13:50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts.

51 But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium.

52 And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost.

Our study of the fruit of joy has led us to discover that certain obstacles can impede our ability to retain joy in our Christian walk. In the process of learning about true Christian joy, we have learned that it entails trials and chastenings, patience and longsuffering, perseverance and forbearance. The keys to maintaining our joy have been sprinkled throughout this study, but allow me to recap them for us as we move towards a close in this study.

Key #1: If our joy seems impeded, do a guilt check and if it tests positive, then deal with the sin immediately. Confess it and forsake it. "Psalm 51 it," if you will, and then expect God to restore to you the joy of His salvation.

Key #2: Believe God and trust in His plan for your life. He has written the script for your part and he has planned an unfathomable outcome for you in eternal bliss!

Key #3: When trials and chastenings impede our joy, make sure we are focusing on the long-term benefits instead of the present circumstances. We have our names written in heaven. We have the promise of the

Creator of the universe that He will raise us from the dead in glorious, immortal bodies to enjoy His company and that of all His creation for eternity. With that yardstick for comparison, our present—sometimes very painful—circumstances can be seen in their proper perspective.

And key #4, we have not read yet, but it is the continuation of Colossians 1. We left off in verse 11.

Colossians 1: 11 Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness;

12 Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:

Key #4 is to give thanks. As it says elsewhere in Scripture, we are to give thanks in ALL THINGS, for what we perceive as the bad and the good. Because it is all designed for our ultimate good. I would recommend you read the short book of Philippians because its main theme is rejoicing. As in...

Philippians 4: 4 Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

Brothers and sisters, we possess the most precious heirloom of all: that we are partakers of the inheritance of eternal glory with the Father, and Jesus and their Holy Spirit. That is enough reason to give thanks for all eternity! [End of our study on the fruit of joy.]

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