

## Prologue

Recently, in my daily readings in Scripture, I came to a verse in the letter of James that shook me. It was clearly a command from God, and I instinctively knew that I was not fully in obedience to it.

I remembered reading in Frances Ridley Havergal's little book *Royal Commandments* that she had once set herself to read through the Scriptures looking for any command that she was not aware of in order to obey it also. Her yearning was not to break any

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of God's requirements and that she should be wholly obedient to all His desires. 'Keep and seek for all the commandments of the Lord your God,' she wrote, quoting from 1 Chronicles 28:8. She continued, 'We have even a little shrinking from this. We are afraid of seeing something which might be peculiarly hard to keep ... it might be enough to try to keep what commandments we have seen without seeking for still more!' I had thought to myself at the time, phew! I find it hard enough to keep all the commands that I do know – without seeking any others!

But here was the commandment in James that shook me: 'Count it all joy ... when you meet trials of various kinds ...' (James 1:2). Had I really read it correctly? Wasn't that going a bit over the top? I had fairly recently sought to come to terms with Paul's statement in his letter to the Philippians: 'I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content ...' (Phil. 4:11). I had even testified to coming to terms with that standard of acceptance of the Lord's will in my recent book *Enough*. But to 'count it all joy'? No! And the verse in James specifically says that the 'all' includes tough moments – trials. To accept these as part of

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the Lord's will, yes, that is fair enough, but to 'count it joy' – I wasn't there yet.

So I began to think that perhaps the word in the original language that is translated as 'joy' in ours had a different connotation? To us it usually speaks of happiness, at achievement or of acceptance. Yet it is the same word as is used of our Lord Jesus as He faces Gethsemane and Calvary: 'Jesus ... for the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb. 12:2, my italics).

Chara, the Greek word meaning 'joy', is used twenty times in the Gospels – often relating to our Lord Jesus. We find the word in Luke 8:13, when Jesus is explaining the meaning of the Parable of the Sower: '... the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with *joy*' (my italics). Again, when the woman who had lost a precious silver coin found it, she calls her neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin I had lost' (Luke 15:9). Jesus goes on to add, 'Just so, I tell you, there is *joy* before the angels of God over one sinner who repents' (Luke 15:10, my italics).

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Did not the angels, who announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds on the hillside, sing of this same *joy*? ‘I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord’ (Luke 2:10–11). One last example for the moment is when Jesus was preparing His disciples for His departure: ‘... you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your *joy* from you’ (John 16:22, my italics).

So, if that is what *chara* means – whole-hearted *joy* – can I honestly say that I ‘count it all joy’, whatever comes, even trials and heartaches and difficulties?

We can add to all this that in the psalter we are constantly exhorted to ‘make a joyful noise to the LORD’ (see, for example, Ps. 98:4, 100:1). In the letter to the Hebrews, the Christian brothers and sisters are actually commended for having ‘joyfully accepted the plundering of your property’ (Heb. 10:34) – again, I ask, isn’t that going a bit too far? When Paul was writing to encourage the Christians at Colossae to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, ‘fully pleasing to him’, he

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prays for them that they will be strengthened, 'for all endurance and patience with *joy*, giving thanks to the Father ...' (Col. 1:10–12, my italics).

My mind realizes that there is a parallel set of verses, based on 'giving thanks' at all times. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he actually puts rejoicing, praying and giving thanks together in one sentence – in all circumstances! – and assures us that this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us (1 Thess. 5:16–18). Likewise, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul says, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice' (Phil. 4:4) and 'do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God' (Phil. 4:6). These are actually commandments – not mere sentiments.

I was therefore forced to think earnestly, how can these commands be? What am I missing out on?

I looked back on what God had given me to write my book *Enough*. I am wholly assured that His grace is sufficient to meet all our needs, in every situation, through every trial. I began to see this wonderful truth was

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God's side of the bargain. It is His grace that is sufficient – there is enough for each one of us to receive all that we need. And so what does our response have to be?

I then remembered the night that I first heard the wonderful Gospel – that Jesus, God's only Son, had died for *me* on the cross, taking the punishment of all my failures, all my sinfulness, and paying the full price demanded by a Holy God, that I might be forgiven, restored and adopted into His family. I entered into His amazing and overwhelming love. That same evening I was given a Bible. Dr Graham Scroggie wrote a verse on the flyleaf for me: '... that I may know him [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings' (Phil. 3:10). He also said to me, 'Tonight you have started that verse, "that I may know him": my prayer for you is that you will come to know more and more of the power of His resurrection.' Then very quietly, looking straight at me, he went on, 'Perhaps one day the Lord will give you the privilege of sharing in His sufferings!'



I had been a Christian about half an hour, and I was being told that it would be a privilege



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to suffer with Him and for Him! And yet ... yes! That has become the foundation block of my Christian life. It has to be my response to His grace: the realization of privilege, no matter what.

Romans 8:28 exhorts us all, as Christians, ‘... we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.’ I have known that verse for years: I have preached on it; I have exhorted others to accept its wonderful truth and believe it. Yet suddenly I was seeing it from another perspective. In other words, God was saying to me that as I trust Him and seek to live in Him and for Him, then I can assuredly know that nothing will be allowed to touch my life by accident or coincidence. God is in control, and in fulfilment of His will – on a larger canvas than I can see – everything big or little that comes into my life is part of His purpose. That is utterly amazing! He offers me the privilege of being part of His purpose, part of His plan, moment by moment. So I can think of everything that comes as a *privilege!* Whether it seems hurtful or joyful, whether I think I can see a point in it or not, *ALL is*





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*privilege*. The next step, if that is so, is that I can say – and truly mean – that in everything I *can* rejoice: counting it all joy, even in trials and tribulations.

I now look back over my seventy years of loving and serving the Lord Jesus. It is often so much easier to see in hindsight how each circumstance worked itself out to be a *privileged joy*. Yet I am sure, as we all grow in grace, we will come to accept and understand this tremendous truth day by day without having to resort to, or wait for, hindsight!

