

Joy in Suffering

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Lead verse: John 17:13

John 17:13: And now come I to Thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have MY JOY fulfilled in themselves.

The drink offering formed part of the offerings under the old dispensation and was their accompaniment. In the book of Numbers chapter 28:7 we read: "In the holy place shalt thou cause the strong wine to be poured unto the Lord for a drink offering."

Joy in the Father's Will

What is the meaning and significance of thus connecting wine with sacrifice? Sacrifice speaks of death, and death involves suffering. Why should joy — for wine is a symbol of joy — be associated with suffering? We think the explanation can be found in the life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. His experiences furnish the answer. With Him the drink offering was never lacking. He found joy even in suffering. Not only did He submit to the will of God — He found pleasure in doing so. That will involve suffering of the deepest and most mysterious kind — a suffering which no one understood but Himself, and in which there was no alleviation, not even human sympathy. Yet, present in it all, there was this element of joy. The joy He had in doing the Father's will, in accepting His Father's appointment, was part of His wondrous offering to God.

This may not seem apparent always. In Gethsemane, for instance, we do not seem to catch any note of joy. Rather, was it not "strong crying and tears"? Yes, that is true. But not because the joy was absent, only because it is hidden from our eyes by the intensity of the ordeal and the anguish. It was scarcely the occasion when the joy could be uppermost, but it was there — even on the cross. Underneath the agony and bloody sweat, beneath the cross and passion, joy lay. We catch a note of it in these words spoken in full prospect of all that awaited Him: "These things have I spoken unto you, that MY JOY might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." And those other words uttered in prayer: "These things I speak in the world, that they might have My joy fulfilled in themselves." And again these words to Peter: "The cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?" It was "when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives. All that darkness and distress and desertion faced with a note of triumph! For that "hymn" was probably Psalm 118.

His Joy in Us

Here was His joy — here was the drink offering. But our Lord and Master prayed, as we have seen, that His joy might be fulfilled in us.

Is it being fulfilled? Have we this joy? Today is one of intense suffering to many of God's children. The rude hand of war is laid roughly upon them and is snatching away their nearest and dearest. Mothers hear that their only sons are wounded and perhaps learn no more for days. Others have to bear the agony of the tidings that those they looked to see again are torn

from them — killed and buried in one day. To some there is the still greater agony of suspense; they know only that their sons are missing.

How shall they bear themselves? What can be done in and with such sorrow? That is the question many are asking. Is there any answer? Yes. With the sacrifice there was to be the drink offering. Underneath all the agony and the tears there may be joy. Although man is directly responsible for this strife and bloodshed, yet God has allowed it and permits His children, more or less remotely, to become involved in it, and all loss and pain which are the consequence must be accepted as from His hand.

Joy Despite Tears

Here only shall we find joy. This does not mean that the joy can ever be in the thing itself, but in God's will. Nor does it mean that there will be neither tears nor heart pangs. There were these in Christ Himself. But with Him there was the joy behind and underneath all, and so it may be with ourselves. His sufferings were deeper than ours can ever be.

It was for this Christ prayed. Joy was His though He knew all that was coming upon Him — the insult, the opposition, the injustice, the ingratitude, the loneliness, the forsaking, the pain of body and agony of soul. But although all this was so near when He uttered that prayer to the Father, the joy does not vanish, and He asks that it may be ours. It is Joy in doing and bearing the Father's will, whatever that may involve. Nor is this an impossibility, as we shall see both from the teaching of the epistles and the direct example of the early Christians.

In Colossians 1:11 we read those remarkable words about "longsuffering with joy" (JND). Such a statement, coupled with our Lord's prayer, makes it perfectly evident that this joy our Lord had is to be reproduced in His people. It is God's will, oftentimes, that we should suffer, and suffer long, but the exhortation is to joyfulness. How out of reach such an experience seems! But the contents of verse 10 and 11 help us to the realization of it. We read of "the knowledge of God," and of being "strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power." Every experience along the road tests us as to how much we know of God. And our conduct under trial reveals whether we know much or little. Christ knew God perfectly, and therefore He surrendered everything, and suffered everything, joyfully. The mystery of pain and suffering never clouded His vision of God, although His own pain was greater than the world knows anything about.

Trust in a Well-Known God

God is now revealed to us, and if we know Him we shall have the same trust that Christ had. Shall we find fault with anything our Father appoints? Shall we complain because of what He permits? We should not, if we knew Him! He can be more to us than anything He takes from us. And He wants us to have that experience.

*"Go not far from me, Oh my strength, Whom all my times obey;
Take from me anything Thou wilt,
But go not Thou away."*

A deeper knowledge of God will give us victory. It is the effect of His glorious power. And this glory is just the revelation of Himself — we are admitted into the presence of perfect goodness, and love without measure, and we know that nothing can go wrong. In that atmosphere, and in view of such a revelation, bitterness, doubt and unrelieved grief cannot be. Instead, we give thanks — "Giving thanks unto the Father." This immediately follows the exhortation to "long-suffering with joyfulness." In order to achieve this, all we need is the true "knowledge of God" to be consciously before Him as He is revealed in Christ, and to be in the presence of the His glorious power.

Joy in Hard Circumstances

Such an experience is not transcendental, nor ought it to be exceptional. We have seen already that it was Christ's. And this is brought to our notice on more than one occasion. "In that hour," we read, "Jesus rejoiced in spirit." And "that hour" was one of special trial, the hour of rejection and want of appreciation, as the context shows us. Here, again, was the drink offering. He accepted the suffering from His Father's hand, and there was joy. It is in the gospel by Luke that this is recorded. Matthew's account is simply, "At that time Jesus answered and said" — with no mention of joy (Matthew 11). And here we have one of those perfect touches of which the gospels are full, for it is Luke who specially presents to us Christ in His human nature of which the meat offering was the type; and the drink offering and meat offering were ever closely associated. How wonderful to see a man rejoicing in the will of God, whatever that will might entail. Oh, how different it is oftentimes with ourselves! We are full of regret, if not of secret or open opposition, because God's will is not what one wishes it to be, and we find it is hard to submit. And the reason is because the flesh is in us, and we allow it to govern us, and the flesh "is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

For there was a third thing associated with the meat offering and drink offering, and that was oil. Interpreted in the light of the New Testament, this is rightly taken to be a figure of the Holy Spirit. Oil does not mix with other elements. It has power to pervade all it touches, imparting its own character. It would be strange indeed if the Holy Spirit were not in any way prefigured in connection with the offerings. We find then that the oil was an accompaniment of the meat offering and drink offering. What does this teach us but that it is only in the power of the Holy Spirit that we can have this joy of which we are speaking?

Joy Through the Holy Spirit

This is very plainly set forth in the book of Numbers chapter 25. Here we have special attention drawn to the meat offering, and to its double accompaniment of oil and wine. And these last were always to be of equal measure, according to the size of the meat offering. The larger the meat offering the greater the quantity of oil and wine. What does this tell us, but that our joy will always be in proportion to the Spirit's power and indwelling, and also that the extent to which He fills us will be according to how large a place Christ has in our hearts and lives. For one tenth deal of flour there was to be the fourth part of a hin of oil and of wine, for two-tenth deals, a third part, and for three-tenth deals, a half. The more Christ is to us, and the greater our communion, the more of power and joy. In proportion as we are occupied with Him, we shall be filled with the Spirit, and the more that is so, the more this joy in suffering will

be ours in consequence.

How abundantly the early disciples realized this is seen in the Acts and in the various epistles — and most of all was this the case in times of trial and persecution. When the apostles' lives were in jeopardy, we read, "they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer" (Acts 5:41). When persecution broke out at Antioch, we are told in Acts 13:52 that "the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost." When Paul and Silas were in prison at Philippi, and their feet fast in the stocks, and their backs bleeding, they prayed and sang praises. And Paul could afterwards write to those same Philippians, his own converts, and say, "If I be offered (poured out as a libation — a drink offering) upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all." The Thessalonian believers had "received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost."

Perfect Communion

Do we not see from all this that sufferings and afflictions are no unaccustomed things — that the fiery trial that is to try us is not to be regarded as strange — but that if in it we bow to the will of God, there will come to us a fullness of blessing never yet tasted, and we, too, shall be filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. God never allows us to suffer loss, that He does not compensate us in some higher way. He never takes one thing from us, without giving us a better in its place. It may be with us as it was with Jacob of old, when God brought him back to Bethel, after all his vicissitudes and wanderings and much painful discipline, God changed his name to Israel, and said, "I am God Almighty." For our blessing is always in some new discovery of God, or by a reminder of what He is. And God gave him promises and talked with him. The response to this was — "Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He (God) talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon." All God's dealings — hard as they seemed at times — led at last to perfect communion with Himself, and the drink offering and the oil were not slacking. Here, in the earliest mention we have of these two things, we find them associated, and they remain so throughout the Scriptures, and will to the end. The Holy Spirit enables us to joy in God — in spite of what He may call us to suffer or surrender. With the sacrifice, there will be the drink offering.

May there be in our lives the joy that was Christ's, because enabled to accept everything — however painful — from the hand of the Father, who will never cause His child a needless tear.