

# DANCING IN THE DARK

## How to Find Joy Amidst the Mess

**Text: James 1:1-8**

### **Chippie's Story**

Someone once said that the hard fact of life is that life is full of hard facts! Perhaps that is what James was getting at when he wrote: **"Consider it pure joy, my brothers [and sisters], whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2)**. It is significant, don't you think, that James does not call his listeners to faith "if" you face trials, or "just in case you happen to" you face trials, but **"whenever"** you face trials of many kinds." Like Jesus' parable about the two house-builders, James reminds us that there is no possibility of building the house of your life where there are no storms; and sooner or later they rattle our cage and hit us all.

To illustrate this principal, I think of a story that first appeared in a Texas newspaper about a pet-owner and her parakeet named "Chippie." It seems that this woman was cleaning Chippie's bird cage with one of those cannister vacuum cleaners with the long suction tubes onto which you put the various attachments. On this particular occasion, however, she was cleaning the bottom of the cage with no attachments on the tube, when the telephone rang. As many of us tend to do, she took on a bit more than might seem wise and continued to vacuum the bottom of the cage while reaching for the phone. At precisely the moment she picked up the phone and began to speak, the sound of her own voice was interrupted by the unpleasant sound of something a bit too large being sucked down the vacuum hose!

Immediately hanging up on the caller, the woman ripped open the vacuum bag and found her precious Chippie in there, terribly stunned but nevertheless still alive. Since the bird was covered from beak to claw in dust and soot, she ran to the bathroom, turned the water in the sink on full blast, and held Chippie under the stream – all the better to clean him off. Finding that this remedy produced a somewhat less than delightful response from her now nearly drowned bird, the owner spotted the hair dryer on the bathroom sink. Turning it on high, she held Chippie in front of the rage of hot air, all the better to dry him off.

Well, somehow the story began to spread through the town, until it finally attracted the attention of an editor at the local newspaper on a day when the paper was apparently a bit shy on newsworthy events. A reporter arrived at the house to do a follow-up and, having confirmed the aforementioned grisly details, he concluded the interview by asking the homeowner: "So, how's Chippie doing now?" "Well, " she said, "Chippie doesn't seem physically any the worse for wear. But he doesn't sing or dance around much anymore. He just

sort of sits there all day and stares."

### **When YOU Feel Like Chippie**

Have you ever felt that way before -- so ruffled and mishandled by life that the last thing you felt like doing was singing or dancing? Maybe you've gotten sucked out of your familiar cage and whirled through the tube of a transition of some kind -- a cross-country move, a divorce, the loss of a significant relationship, the demise of the simple dependability of life as it used to be. Perhaps you've lost your perch on the job. Maybe things with your family are shaky at best, or there is NO family at home with whom to share the good times or bad. Or perhaps you're still covered with the dust and soot of that tough time you had at school last year and are feeling nervous that this year ahead might not be any better. Maybe you or someone you know has been seriously ill. Or perhaps you're dealing with an addiction that leaves you drenched with desire one moment and blown out of control the next.

All of us, I imagine, know what's like to have our feathers ruffled to the point where we no longer feel like making music. Maybe that's why, when we occasionally come across someone dancing in the in the face of the dark side of life, it pulls us up short. There is something that makes us want to know if the person who holds this strangely optimistic attitude is just lucky, or stupid, or maybe onto something that begs closer study indeed. How, for example, can James -- a person as well or better-acquainted with grief, loss, uncertainty, and worry as any one of us -- speak of the "many trials" of life as occasions for "joy" of all things?

The answer, I believe, ultimately hinges on ridding ourselves of the tendency to think of joy as simply happiness with the volume turned up. "Happiness" is something that comes and goes in our lives like the wind. It may be dictated by the weather, our biochemistry, the Dow Jones Index, the current state of rapport we have with our spouse or friends, or a hundred other variables beyond our control. But the fruit of the Spirit we call "joy" is something far less easily disrupted or destroyed by the vagaries of nature, others, or self. Oh, we might want to live for good feelings, happy memories, comfortable moments in the sun, and all these things are a desirable and precious part of what it is to be human and a child of God. But "joy" is something else altogether.

Please tune in and remember this. It is that rich and confident state of the soul that grows within us when we choose to live through life's trials with three vital perspectives. Writer B. Howland described his discovery of the first of those perspectives in this way: For a long time it seemed to me that life was about to begin -- real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way. Something to be got through first, some unfinished business; some time still to be served, some debt yet to be paid. Then life would begin. Until one day it dawned on me: these obstacles were my life."

Do you understand that for yourself? Do you recognize that the sweet music of your life is already playing? Too many of us don't. We keep postponing stepping out on the risky dance floor of relationships, or fully giving ourselves to serving Christ, or truly pursuing the dreams we have, because we're waiting for the music to begin. But friends, the music has begun. For some of us, the song is nearing the end. The truth is that the trials you may be facing right now aren't discordant sounds blocking us from the genuine music of life; they are absolutely vital chords in the melody of a rich and authentic life.

God wrote the music this way. In His wise, tough love, God allows in our lives stanzas of stress and struggle which we would never choose for ourselves, but which also call up in us passions and capacities that can only be discovered and developed while moving to such music. As James reminds us, God's ultimate ambition for us is that we become **"mature and complete, not lacking anything."** God dreams of the day when you and I will seek above all else to be creatures not of comfort but of character -- people able to view the obstacles in our lives as opportunities to trust where others might doubt, to give where others might take, to build up where others might tear down, and to admit our failures and foibles where others might lie or deny. He dares to think that we might become beings who look, live, and love a bit more like Him -- beings able to create in the face of destruction, hope in the midst of despair, love in the midst of division, and dance in the face the dark.

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Don't you want to be such a person? Then please understand this as well. There is no shortcut to the kind of joy which is the ripened fruit of Christian character. You can't read a couple of self help books, pop a few pills, listen to a good sermon, or attend a weekend seminar and think you'll walk out **"mature and complete, and not lacking anything,"** able to rejoice in the face of all terror. There's only one route to the kind of joyful character that can make of life a dance not a dirge. And that route, as James reminds us again, is **"perseverance."**

In his marvelous book, *Holy Sweat*, author Tim Hansel shares a variety of stories that make that point brilliantly. One of them is the tale of a boy of a generation or two ago who one day accidentally poured gasoline instead of kerosene on a stove fire in his little country schoolhouse. The stove blew up, so seriously injuring the boy that the doctors wanted to amputate his legs immediately. But the boy's parents begged: "Just give us one more day." Day by day they repeated their plea, until months had passed and it was time to take off his bandages. Removing the wrappings, the doctors discovered that the boy's left leg was now two inches shorter than the right, and his right foot was missing most of its toes. "You will never walk," they reported. But with months of perseverance, he did walk. And so he was warned, he would never walk without

crutches. But with perseverance he eventually left even the crutches behind. In time he broke into a wobbly jog. And then he decided to try running. In a handful of years, this boy, Glen Cunningham, had become one of the greatest runners in Olympic history, a man once called "the world's fastest human being."

Did you know that Martin Luther considered his first efforts to reform the Christian movement an utter failure, and despaired of ever succeeding in provoking reform? Abraham Lincoln lost election after election and nearly gave up politics. George Bernard Shaw had his first 5 novels rejected. Even closer to home, I can tell you that I was THIS far from giving up on being pastor of this church a few years into the journey here. I figured I just didn't have the gift of leadership needed to manage the challenge of this place. My wife could tell you that there have been seasons in our marriage when one or the other of us was tempted to cash it all in. It felt like we were a failed couple. There are probably dozens of people in this very room who have been in places of discouragement or despair that they thought they might never overcome. But they did.

When we hear stories like those, perhaps we are tempted to say: "Sure, preacher, great story. But let's get real for a second. What about me? I'm not as young and resilient as that boy Cunningham was. I don't have the support and encouragement from others that people like you have. I'm not gifted. I'm caught in a web of responsibilities. I'm in a deep rut in my life. I've lost more than you know. I'm scared of further risks. I'm staring death in the face. As author Amy Carmichael once said:

"Sometimes when we read the words of those who have been more than conquerors, we feel almost despondent. I feel that I shall never be like that. But [then I remember that] they won through step by step: by little bits of will; little denials of self; little inward victories; by faithfulness in very little things. They became what they are. No one sees these little hidden steps. They only see the accomplishment, but even so those small steps were taken. There is no sudden triumph, no sudden spiritual maturity. That is the work of the moment."

Could this sort of thing have been what Jesus meant when he promised that with faith in the power of God at work in us anything was possible? Could this have been what he meant when he said the Kingdom of God was like a mustard seed? Could this have been the kind of hope that he intended us to have when he said that even death was but a doorway to those who have faith? Could this be the reason that from the first to the last breath of His human life, and with every wind of his Spirit since, He has called his followers to keep dancing in the dark? Maybe so.

So, my brothers [and sisters], why not try this week considering it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. [And] perseverance must finish its work, so

that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Let us pray....

God, fill us with that abundant joy which flows from a steadfast confidence in your power to work your good purposes through all the events of our lives. Give us that unparalleled joy which flows from the decision to pursue character above comfort. Then when that fruit has bloomed in our lives, help us to so overflow with faith, hope, and love into the lives of others, that we might bring joy to you. For these things we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

Daniel D Meyer | Christ Church of Oak Brook  
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Tim Hansel, Holy Sweat: How God Uses Ordinary People to Do Extraordinary Things, p.129.