

## The Crown of Life

by Bill Volkman

The short letter of James has been the cause of much heated debate among students of the Bible. The controversy centers on the issue of faith versus works in the area of gaining our salvation. Considered in the context of the entire New Testament, it is clear that eternal salvation is by faith alone—by acceptance of Christ’s atoning work for our redemption—so how shall we understand James’ insistence on the necessity of good works? We must remember that James is speaking to those who already have the faith, and his concern is that they might grow up in it. We read this in the letter’s opening verses:

*“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience” (James 1:2,3).*

He tells those of us who are already Christians not to be discouraged by temptations, but to “count it all joy,” since it is through testing that our faith will grow patient and firm. The phrase “*count it all joy*” suggests that we are to *welcome* adversity and the various tensions of life, as they are meant to be the negative springboard to bring about many of the positive realities of life. Temptations, trials, and the other terrible “T”s of life—testings, tensions, tribulations, tragedies and turmoils—all lead us to the same end: greater maturity. God *means* for us to pass through these crucibles, for it is by adversity that we come to greater growth, contentment and happiness.

James is concerned not so much with our salvation in the heavens, but with the manifestation of our saintliness right here and now. “*Be not only hearers and preachers of the word, but also doers.*” James seems to be saying that talk is cheap, and I never understood that more clearly than I did yesterday. For though I believe all this business about “*count it all joy when you fall into temptations*” (and God only knows how often in the past I’ve counseled others to do just that), yesterday I experienced again that it is a lot easier to tell *another* person to apply a particular spiritual principle to his life than it is to apply it to my *own* life. It’s easier to practice wisdom than it is to practice understanding.

By all outward appearances, yesterday was surely one of the “worst” days of my life. It was disaster even before the word go. I had gone to bed the previous night arguing with my wife, we had awakened at about 1:30 A.M. to go at it for another hour, and I slammed the door of our apartment in a rage when I left for the office at 7:00 A.M. With a negative start like that, it isn’t surprising that disaster followed disaster in rapid succession throughout the entire day.

My first appointment was with an IRS agent who was reviewing my 1982 income tax return. Who would count *that* all joy? The next couple of hours were spent watching sadly as my stock and commodity investments eroded badly. Each interrupting visitor or phone call seemed to bring more bad news and more pressure of one kind or another. Even my son Scott’s call from Hawaii was no consolation. On the contrary, here I was under all this pressure, and there my number one business associate and confidant was having the time of his life on his tenth wedding anniversary on a beach in Maui!

I won’t go into any more detail as you know what it’s like: a day when everything goes “wrong,” and tension sends you to the breaking point. I couldn’t count *any* of it as joy yesterday, I couldn’t see *any* adventure in the adversity, and “seeing through” was quite impossible.

But my consciousness of the inner Christ was always there. I still faintly heard “the still small voice” and I still sensed “the gentle nudge within,” though I refused at that point to make the choice to change my negative responses. God’s overtures were totally over-

ridden by my feelings, the outer appearances, and the screams of my flesh. I was feeling sorry for myself, and even the cautious words of a couple of UNION LIFE associates who saw my anger and frustration didn't stop me from my all day "pity-party."

It wasn't until I returned home for dinner that night that I finally came to myself—the real Self—and was able to see the negative experiences of the day as blessings from God rather than as tragedy from the tempter. Only then did I choose to act according to my true nature—in righteousness and love. The catalyst to turn me around was a simple act of love on the part of my wife: she had given me the "red plate" at dinner, along with a three-page positive letter that said some things I needed to hear. (Many gift stores sell this red plate, which has the words, "You are special today," printed on the border, to be used for friends or family members when you want to tell them that they are "special"— exactly what we all need at times.)

Instead of chiding me for all my ridiculous blustering, swearing and obnoxious comments of the night before, as well as on the phone all day, Marge took a positive approach that brought me around. Marabel Morgan is quite right in her book, *Total Woman*: husbands do respond to the four "A's"— accept, admire, adapt and appreciate.

But why had all of this happened to me? Simple: to further establish me as to who I really am in Christ. The misuses of myself and the negative choices of yesterday were all necessary for the editor of *Union Life* magazine and writer of *The Wink of Faith* (who had been totally unable to "see through" or "wink"), to be further settled in his faith. I needed another painful, dramatic reminder of my duality—a reminder that, as Christians, we have this Treasure (Christ) in very earthen vessels: we are always the negative, susceptible to misuse, and He is forever the Positive; we are always *a combination of dust and Deity*. God was in action in my life to further bestow on me His special gift—*the crown of life*.

The Bible speaks of some ten different crowns which are the destined inheritance of Christians; but the one which I most desire for myself and for my world is the crown of life—the gift of abundant life, here and now. After admonishing us to "*count it all as joy*," James goes on to tell us of this crown which is in store for us:

*"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the **crown of life**, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (James 1:12).*

What exactly is the nature of this reward, *the crown of life*? Is it (as I assumed for many years) a special prize that God passes out to a few select Christians after their death? I think not. It's not a good-behavior-award that one receives in a future life, but a vital gift available right now to every Christian. Remember, though, that the efficacy and practical worth of this gift is directly proportional to the spiritual maturity of the individual involved.

I believe the crown of life is the *gift of awareness*— the awareness that enables us to live life in a fullness that is always growing fuller. The verb tenses in the Concordant Literal version of James 1:12 shows more clearly than other more popular versions that the crown of life is our ability to *presently* realize an ever-widening measure of our innate potential, rather than a gift to be doled out in heaven to a few select achievers.

*"Happy is the man who is enduring trial, for **becoming** qualified, he will be **obtaining** the wreath of life, which God promises to those **loving** Him."*

Notice that we are to "*be **obtaining** the wreath [or crown] of life*"—emphasizing a *continuing* action, rather than a singular event. The more "qualified" or spiritually mature we become, via the trials we experience, the more we will realize the higher reaches of an abundant, fulfilling life. Like it or not, our capability for living life in fullness is intimately linked to how

we respond to the “crucible” or refining experiences of life. Aldous Huxley was right: “Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you *do* with what happens to you.”

So allow the tensions and pressures of each day to accomplish their purpose in your life—allow them to bring about their “*perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*” (James 1:4). Determine to see God at work for your good in all that happens. When you don’t immediately see God in a negative outer experience, don’t be surprised. It seems that most of us do much of our learning in the negative responses and in the temporary misuses of our perfect selves. For this reason, we regret nothing—not even our misuses. “*For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret*” (2 Cor. 7:10).

Though it took me most of twenty-four hours before I could “*count it all joy*” and choose to change my outlook and response pattern, I still see every one of yesterday’s “hassles” as part of God’s perfect plan for my life. Because of yesterday’s misuses of myself, I now know better who I am as a spirit person, I have grown up a bit more in another aspect of Him who is the head, I have obtained more of the fulfilling crown of life, and I am more competent as a son indwelt by The Son to handle today and tomorrow.