

John - Commentaries by Russell Elliott

Joy In Suffering: Angels In White Expanded, #5, Joy in Suffering (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" (John 17:13).

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.

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 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 no 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 28. 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 slackening. 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.

Contents

Joy in the Father’s Will 3

His Joy in Us 5

Joy Despite Tears 7

Trust in a Well-Known God 9

Joy in Hard Circumstances 11

Joy in and the Holy Spirit 13

Perfect Communion 16

Titles in This Series:

1. Abide With Us #9858
2. Divine Excess #9867
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4. How Long O Lord, Until #9860
5. Joy in Suffering #2249
6. The Lord Hath His Way #9861
7. The Lord of Peace #9859
8. The Meaning of Suffering #9866
9. Personal Grief, Personal Comfort #3540
10. Shipwrecked! #9862
11. Trials — Their Meaning and Use #5351
12. A Wealthy Place #4532
13. Why Art Thou Cast Down? #9864
14. Angels in White Expanded Pamphlet Pack #9868

Each of these articles by R. Elliott is not currently in print in the book Angels in White but was included in the original printing of that title many years ago.

The Lord Of Peace: Angels In White Expanded, #7, Lord of Peace, The (14:1,27)

"The Lord of peace Himself give you peace" (2 Thess. 3:16).

"Let not your heart be troubled . . . Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you" (John 14:1,27).

We hear a great deal today about War Lords. They occupy a foremost place for the moment, and they are filling the world with distress and anguish. Have we ever thought that there is a Peace Lord? — "Now the Lord of peace Himself."

Throughout the chapter from which these words are taken, the apostle has been referring again and again to the lordship of Christ. About nine times we have the title Lord mentioned, until, in verse 16, he speaks of Him as the Lord of Peace. Surely this is one of the sweetest and most suggestive titles that even our Lord and Saviour bears. In the Old Testament, He is spoken of as the Prince of Peace. In the New, as the Lord of Peace.

To the Thessalonians, who received the epistle, these words must have come as a most refreshing revelation. They were experiencing anything but an easy time. "Your patience and faith," says the apostle, "in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure." And again, "And to you who are troubled rest with us." "That ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer." To these tired and harassed disciples, not long converted, how much such words would mean: "Now the Lord of Peace Himself give you peace always by all means."

Let us consider, first, that Christ Himself possesses peace. He is never cast down, never troubled, never perplexed. Peace was always His. When from eternity He looked forward to His earthly mission, with all that it meant of suffering and humiliation, He had peace. And when the earthly mission was entered upon, and brought with it an experience such as no human soul had ever known, His peace remained undisturbed. And still it is His, and will remain His through all the changes this sad earth witnesses, and may yet witness, and through all that the future may bring. Yes, He is the Lord of peace. How blessed, infinitely blessed, Christ has this possession. With ourselves, in our old nature, if we ever know peace, it comes as a very brief phase of our experience. It is fitful and fleeting. It is never the same as His, unless it comes from Him. How many people there are who seem to possess most things except this one essential thing. The world does not know peace (except of a false kind) and it cannot give it.

Peace is not only possessed by Christ, but He gives it. "Now the Lord of Peace Himself give you peace." And this peace will be ours the more steadfastly we fix our gaze upon the Possessor of it. Here is not only one who counsels us to have peace; an earthly friend may do that while not himself enjoying the peace he would advise; but we have to do here with the Lord of Peace Himself. And that very fact imparts peace. In a crisis, or moment of danger, what gives peace like being in the presence of one who is calm and undisturbed? That is precisely what we have

here — not only peace but the Lord of Peace Himself. What an advantage, and what satisfaction, in such a turbulent scene as that in which we live, to know One whose title is "The Lord of Peace."

Nor can we forget that peace is just what He gave to His troubled disciples before He left them. That dark, betrayal night with all it portended did not disturb the Lord of Peace, but it greatly disturbed His disciples. The shadow of His departure hung over them like a thick cloud, and the Lord detects all they were apprehending, and He says to them, "Sorrow hath filled your heart." The disappointment of all they had hoped for chilled them, and so the Lord commenced that wonderful discourse of His which opens in John 14, with these peace-giving words: "Let not your heart be troubled." And He spoke those words as no one else could speak them. We may try to comfort the bereaved, or the sorrowing, or the anxious, and we do it with faltering accents often, and we feel all the time how powerless we are to impart what we speak about. But Christ can say, "Let not your heart be troubled," as a command as well as a consolation. The very fact that the Lord of Peace Himself says this, should dismiss from us all corroding care.

And further on, He adds some other words: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." Our Lord dwells upon some of the greatest truths in the Bible in this discourse, and what a revelation of His character it affords that He thinks first of all of the distress of His downcast disciples and was not above ministering comfort to them.

What did the Lord mean by "Peace I leave with you?" Did it not mean that there was nothing either between themselves and God, or themselves and Him, to cause one moment's disquiet? Every question would be settled by what He was about to do for them. He assures them it is all peace God-ward. But He adds to this: "My peace I give unto you," that it might be all peace manward also. In the world, they would have tribulation. Men would be against them; circumstances might sometimes be hard, but so it had been with Him and yet His peace always remained. He gives that peace to them. My peace I give unto you. How can He impart His own peace? Just because He is the Lord of Peace; and because He is in us, and we are in Him. As He said later, "That in Me ye might have peace." He is just a haven of peace, and in every storm and stress we hide in Him.

How full is the declaration contained in this verse in Thessalonians, "The Lord of Peace Himself give you peace always by all means." Always peace, this is the promise. Perhaps if one thing disturbs our peace more than another, it is that disappointments and disasters happen which we cannot account for, nor do we see any reason why they should have been allowed. Let us wait, and believe that all has happened for the best. If we knew all, we should probably be praising God for that for which we are now ready to chide Him.

The late Reader Harris, K.C., in his book, *How I became an Agnostic, and how God saved me*, relates the following incident which occurred before he was saved. He had been several years in Bolivia as the government engineer, but hearing that his mother was ill in England he was very anxious to catch the first steamer home, having obtained six months leave of absence. "Being the government engineer," he says, "everything possible was done to expedite my journey. I rode 400 miles on mules, and then went another 300 miles by train traveling day and night to the coast. When I reached Mollendo, a miserable hole reeking with yellow fever, I learned to my intense disgust that I had missed the steamer by six hours! I paced up and down, and I cursed God. There was not another steamer for a fortnight. Why was it, I asked, that I was hindered in this innocent and laudable purpose of hastening home to comfort my mother in her illness? Every day as I awoke to find myself in that fever-stricken hole I cursed God afresh.

"At last the next steamer was due. It was late. Two days passed. If only the other steamer had been half as late, I should have caught it. When it did come I hurried on board.

"To my surprise the passengers seemed strangely silent. It was like a city of the dead. I asked what had happened. 'Haven't you heard?' they said. 'No! Heard what?' 'The steamer preceding us up the coast — the finest on the line — went down in the night and all hands were lost.' 'The S.S. — ?' I asked aghast. 'Yes.' 'What about the passengers?' 'They were fortunately very few, but they were all drowned in their bunks.'

"And that was the steamer I had missed," Reader Harris adds, "and cursed God for missing."

In the above case the individual was allowed to see the reason for his disappointment, and why his plans were thwarted. Is it not so always. Even in cases in which God does not give any explanation of His providential dealings, let us turn to the Lord of Peace Himself. He knows why all has been allowed, and He gives "peace always."

The other day, a missionary away out on the borders of China had arranged to return home on furlough. His wife was in Scotland awaiting his return. Just prior to the date of starting he was struck by lightning and killed. On the face of it, there seems nothing to explain why such a calamity was permitted. He had been a blessing to thousands; husband and wife were anticipating the joy of reunion after a long separation; yet the lightning was allowed to do its work. Not long before this tragic occurrence, he had penned the following lines to his wife: —

"Let not your heart be troubled, child beloved; Cast all your care on Him Whose love for thee so often hast thou proved, E'en when thy faith was dim.

"One word of His good promise has not failed thee In all the by-gone years: And looking back across life's cheque red pathway, What love and grace appears.

"Commit thy way unto the Lord, He knoweth The sorrows of the way: And to the one who walks with Him, He sheweth The path of endless day.

"'Tis but a little while, He'll come in glory, Then we shall fully see The meaning of this life's perfected story, And praise eternally."

Yes, in the light of eternity many things will become clear which are now dark and mysterious. In the meantime, may all that is tangled and perplexing and disappointing in our life drive us nearer to the Lord of Peace.

The question was asked the other day, Do our loved ones who have gone before know all that happens to those dear to them who are left behind? Because, if so, would it not disturb their happiness? And at once the answer seemed to come: If they know anything, they know all.

Theirs is a fuller knowledge than ours, and therefore they are not troubled. Our troubles down here so often arise from a partial knowledge. We see only a little bit at a time of God's plan and purpose, and the way it is all being worked out unrolls but slowly. If we knew more, and especially if we knew all, our fears and regrets would be gone. Those early disciples were troubled because their Lord was going away. This is why He prefaced His last discourse with the words, "Let not your heart be troubled." Yet had they known all the advantages which would accrue from His leaving them, they would have rejoiced rather than mourned.

And, lastly, not only does our text say "peace always." but "by all means," Whatever happens, may we have peace, seems to be the meaning here. The word translated "means" has the root idea of "to turn," a "revolution." So that amid all the changing scenes of life we are to have peace. Other translations give "in every sense," or "in every way." Thus, we are to have peace in every sense of the word and under all conditions. Blessed experience! It must be so, but only if the Lord of Peace Himself is with us. At every turn of the tide — whatever misfortune comes — peace. At every turn in the road — whatever new circumstances or scenes surround us — peace. And peace amidst all revolutions. Whatever else goes, peace always, by all means.

"The changes that are sure to come, I do not fear to see."

It is recorded of Barnard Gilpin, a reformer who lived in the days of the Marian martyrdoms and was called the Apostle of the North, that he was famous for never murmuring or complaining, whatever happened to him — circumstances were always the best. Towards the close of Queen Mary's reign, he was suddenly summoned to come up from Durham to London to be tried for heresy, and, in all probability, like Ridley and Latimer, to be burned. The good man quietly obeyed the summons. On his journey his horse fell and Gilpin's leg was broken; and he was laid up at a roadside inn. His friends challenged him as to whether he could say now that all was well. But he still affirmed that all had happened for the best, and so it proved. Weeks and weeks passed before his leg was healed, and he was able to resume his journey. But during these weeks the unhappy Queen Mary died, the persecutions were stopped, and the worthy old reformer returned to his northern home rejoicing.

In this case, we can see how an accident, painful as it was in itself, proved the means of escape from a greater calamity. Many an illness that we know of may have saved us from a greater ill of which we do not know. Our Lord said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me." The point is, we must believe. Believe in God; believe in Christ, and then all must be well. In any case, this faith will bring peace.

If it is true that every individual by his very presence brings a certain atmosphere with him, how true must it be of the Lord of Peace Himself. In His presence, we are in an atmosphere of peace, and in that atmosphere fear cannot dwell. It is not merely some peace-giving word, or an injunction to have peace, or even a promise of peace, which our text contains; it is peace personified — the Lord of Peace Himself. This is the glory of Christianity — that "all that it has, and all that it offers, is treasured up in a Person."

"Peace I leave with you . . . My peace I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." No one but Christ can speak such words. He places Himself in contrast with the whole world, and challenges it to give what He gives. The world can offer many things to its votaries — wealth, pleasure, fame — but peace it cannot give, for it does not possess it; and what are all these other things worth without peace? A servant of the Lord was on his way to catch a train, and he passed a blind woman at the entrance to the station. After taking his ticket he regretted that he had passed her without a word, and he went back. He commiserated upon her loss of sight. And in reply came the answer: "There are other things to make me happy." She was a Christian. She had the Lord of Peace Himself with her.

Do you know these "other things" that can make us happy? There is One, but only one, who can say to us, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

What is it that is troubling you or making you afraid, today? Is it the slowness with which your goal is being reached and your purposes achieved? Someone has said: —

"The most searching discipline of life is never reached until things begin to be terribly slow. Slowness is one of the most exacting tests of character. We want to get there, we want to reap the harvest today. When the snow begins to fall, and the rain comes down in a deluge, and all the roads of progress become muddy, we are apt to lose heart. When the funeral train arrives instead of the wedding chariot, when we sigh, How long, O Lord, how long? then we have reached life's most exacting season. Can we endure slowness, which is the most burdensome part of hardness? Can we, if need be, go slow and keep on going? Can we walk and not faint?"

What is the burden you have to bear? What is it that is testing your strength of endurance? May the Lord of Peace Himself give you peace always by all means. And may the gain also be yours which every grief carries within itself, when we accept it "in subjection unto the Father of spirits and live."

"The more the cross, the better Christian! God lays the touchstone to each soul; How many a garden must lie waste, Did not a tear-storm o'er it roll? Refining grief, a living coal, Upon the Christian's heart is placed.

"The more the cross, the more believing! In desert lands the palm trees grow! And when the grape is strongly pressed, Then doth its sweetness overflow; And strength lies hid in every woe, As pearls do in the salt wave rest.

"The more the cross, the more the praying! The bruised plants yield sweetest balm; Man doth not seek to find the pole in quiet seas and steady calms; And how should we have David's psalms, Had he not had a troubled soul?

"O, Jesus Lord, the crucified! Now let the cross more welcome be, Nor let my soul complaining toss, But plant Thou such a heart in me, As patiently shall look to Thee For gain up yonder, for my loss."

Christ Gives Peace 5

Peace Manward 7

Peace Always. 9

Peace Without Explanation 12

Peace By All Means 15

The Atmosphere of Peace 18

Peace in the Middle of Trouble 19

1. Abide With Us #9858

2. Divine Excess #9867

3. God's Providence #9863

4. How Long O Lord, Until #9860

5. Joy in Suffering #2249

6. The Lord Hath His Way #9861

7. The Lord of Peace #9859

8. The Meaning of Suffering #9866

9. Personal Grief, Personal Comfort #3540

10. Shipwrecked! #9862

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