

Series: “Practicing Our Faith”
“When You Face Trials”

Today I’m beginning a series of messages from the Book of James in the New Testament. This is a practical book about practicing our faith. It’s concerned not so much with theology or doctrine, but how to *live out* the beliefs we profess. We’ll cover themes such as: faith and works, faith and healing, faith and our tongue, faith and worldliness, to examine how we can put our faith to work!

Let me make some comments about the book itself. Who wrote it? The answer? *James!* It begins, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). James who? The traditional view is that this is James, the brother of Jesus. It appears from reading the gospels that Jesus’ family, during His ministry, had their doubts about Him, and His divine mission. Apparently, sometime around Jesus’ death and resurrection his brother James becomes a believer and a follower, for in the Book of Acts, James is a prominent leader in the church in Jerusalem. So, perhaps most scholars believe Jesus’ brother James wrote this Letter of James. Others feel it was written by an unknown Christian named James.

To whom was it written? Verse 1 says, “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” “Dispersion” (or Diaspora) is a technical term that refers to Jews living outside of Palestine. It seems this was written to Jewish Christians who were scattered, due to the persecution that took place in the early Church after the stoning of Stephen. Acts 8:1 says, “That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.”

Of course, if the Holy Spirit inspired these writings in our Bible, then it was also written for us! So, let’s get started!

After a brief greeting, James delves right into the topic of *facing trials*. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind...” (James 1:2). The word translated “trials” is a word for trial or testing *that has a goal or purpose*. William Barclay, in his commentary, writes: “(It is a trial, testing, temptation *directed towards an end*, and the end is that he who is tested should emerge stronger and purer from the testing.” Notice, James writes, “Whenever you face trials *of any kind...*” (James 1:2).

How many of you have ever faced any kind of trial or difficulty in your life? Anyone here who has *never* had to face obstacles in life? Hurts. Disappointments. Illnesses. Injustices. Setbacks. Tragedies. Whether we’re rich or poor, black or white or red, smart or dumb, left-handed or right-handed, Christian or atheist – we’ve all faced difficulties, haven’t we? That’s life! Job 5:7 says, “Man is born for trouble as sparks fly upward.” Jesus was very blunt about it. “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33).

I’m at that age where you tend to look back over your life, and reflect more. How some of your views no doubt have changed from when you were young. And one lesson I’ve learned is that, for most people, *life is hard. Life is tough*. There’s a lot of bad stuff mixed in with the good. And most everyone is struggling with one tough thing or another.

So, James gives us some advice on how to view these difficulties when they come, and how best to respond. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but....”. Nothing but *what*.....?

Joy! C’mon! You gotta be kidding. Joy? This is almost insulting. You mean when terrible things happen to me, or someone I love, my response should be to be joyful?

Now if the trials he’s speaking about is *persecution*, I can understand that. He might be writing to Christians who are scattered because of persecution (as I mentioned earlier). Jesus Himself said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. *Rejoice* and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matthew 5:10-12). The early disciples and apostles were joyful when they experienced persecution.

But when *other kinds* of trials come – when we lose our job, when we’re in a car accident, when a medical test brings us bad news, when we’re confronted with some huge repair bill or medical bill – we’re to have *joy*? C’mon!

As a counselor, I say, let’s be careful here. When we’re faced with something terrible, or sad, the normal response is to grieve...or perhaps to be angry. And it’s important to be in touch with those feelings and allow ourselves to have them. (Christians, especially, are good at covering over their true feelings, thinking if we have faith we ought to be able to smile through every difficult situation).

So what do we do with these words from Scripture. “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.” It doesn’t say, consider it nothing but...a good excuse to complain.....a chance to pity yourself.....a justifiable reason to blame God or lose your faith!

Here’s a truth that may seem hard to believe, especially if we’re not people of faith: *When bad things happen, in the midst of our pain and anguish we can still experience the joy of the Lord!* Remember, this word translated “trials” means difficulties in life that test us *for a purpose*. To help us grow and mature.

James goes on: “Because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:3-4). The bad things that happen, the difficulties and problems we face, can test our faith, help us learn patience and endurance, and finally move us on to maturity and completion in our Christian life. And that can produce a deep joy, even in the midst of our pain.

Does God test us, by allowing difficulties in our life? I believe that is true. I don’t think God that every bad thing that happens is something God sent to test us. Sometimes we endure trials and pain because of our own stupidity or foolish choices. And I certainly don’t believe God hurts other people just to test us (like injuring a loved one or having a loved one die just to test

us, or sending a burglar to our house just to test us!). But anything that happen *can serve as a test!* To see how we respond. To see whether or not we hold to our faith and keep trusting in God and His goodness.

I like what William Barclay says, “All kinds of experiences will come to us. There will be the test of the sorrows and the disappointments which seek to take our faith away. There will be the test of the seductions which seek to lure us from the right way. There will be the tests of the dangers, the sacrifices, the unpopularity which the Christian way must so often involve. But the whole point of them is that they are not sent to make us fall; they are sent to make us soar. They are not sent to defeat us; they are sent that we may defeat them. They are not sent to make us weaker; they are sent to make us stronger. And therefore we cannot bemoan them; we must exult in them and rejoice in them.”

In His love for us God wants to refine us, make us strong, move us to maturity in our faith. God’s goal is not to make us *happy*, but to make us *holy*. God has a different goal than many of us have in life – even as Christians. His purpose is not to make life easy and comfortable 100% of the time, but to make us stronger.....more disciplined.....more pure.....more Christlike in character.

Someone has said, “All sun makes a desert.” Mildred Witte Struven has said, “A clay pot sitting in the sun will always be a clay pot. It has to go through the white heat of the furnace to become porcelain.” A pastor, a dad, says, “When our kids were little, if things got tough, I’d tell them it built character, to which Stephen, our son would respond, ‘I don’t want to be a character.’” (God wants us to have Christlike character, not necessarily to *be* a character!).

If the reality is that life is hard, and hard is normal, then the question we need to be asking isn’t “How do I get out of this?” but “What can I learn from this?” *God wants to teach us, and give us understanding through times of testing.* Perhaps that’s why James continues with these words: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5-8). How can I gain wisdom from the hard things of life? How can they make me a better person, a more mature follower of Jesus? Ask God for wisdom. But ask in faith, trusting that God will give it.

Being a Christian doesn’t insulate us from the trials and tribulations that are a part of life, but as believers we can respond differently – with joy! *One reason we can have joy even in the midst of pain is that God is with us!*

Illust. Dr. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, enjoyed time with four close friends, vibrant Christian men. The next morning the four men boarded a small plane to fly back to Dallas. They never made it. Their plane was found crashed in a remote canyon with no survivors. Dobson felt the sharp pain of grief, along with the many others who grieved. He couldn’t help asking those questions, why, why did this happen? God doesn’t make sense.

The why was never answered directly. But he said they did discover God's presence at the funerals.

After the funeral was over, they were standing outside talking and someone pointed to the sky and said, "Look at that!". The four families devastated looked to the sky. Dobson stated, "Suspended directly above the steeple was a rainbow in the shape of a smile. There had been no precipitation that day and no more than a few fleecy clouds. Yet this beautiful little rainbow appeared above the church.

We learned later that it had been hovering there through most of the funeral service. It was as though the Lord was saying to the grieving wives and children, "Be at peace. Your men are with Me, and all is well. I know you don't understand, but I want you to trust Me. I'm going to take care of you, and this rainbow is a sign to remember." One man who saw the rainbow took a picture of the rainbow. When they developed it, there in the sky next to the rainbow was a small private plane, cradled near the rainbow.

Life is tough, but we have a God bigger than whatever we have to face, who is with us.

There's a wonderful promise, later in the first chapter of the Book of James, that's kind of like the icing on the cake.

Verse 12 (NIV): "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

God honors those who keep holding on to Him and trusting Him, even through the most difficult times of life!

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