

“Joy in Trials?”
James 1:1-12
June 11, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning today a study of the letter of James, a letter that addresses an enemy the Church has long fought. This enemy has been referred to by different names throughout the ages, but it is really referring to one thing. It might be called easy-believism, cheap grace, shallow faith or even false faith. Whatever it is called, it is simply a faith that never makes it from the head to the heart and hands. In the famous words of James 1, it is the kind of faith that makes us willing to hear the word (and even agree with it) but not willing to do it. This person has enough faith to think he has the real thing, but not enough faith actually to bring salvation. He professes faith but does not possess it. He thinks he has true faith while his religion is actually “worthless” (1:26).

One of the most obvious features of James’ letter is its practical nature. It contains 59 practical commands in only 108 total verses. These practical commands, when properly received, are intended to deepen our faith. We can see that right at the beginning of his letter in a passage that speaks of the role of trials in strengthening our faith. The first command of his letter is to **“count it all joy... when you meet trials of various kinds”** (v. 2).

I. The Medicine our Faith Needs

James begins with the topic of trials because he says that trials are necessary if our faith is to be more than the shallow faith he wants to deliver us from. So he says very simply, albeit confusingly, that we are to count it all joy when we encounter various trials. What could he possibly mean by this? Let me first mention a couple of things he does not mean. First, he doesn’t mean that we are being sinful if we grieve during trials. Every trial involves a loss of some kind, such as a loss of health, money, reputation, relationship or even just time or convenience. The appropriate human response to such losses is grief and sadness. Jesus himself responded in this way when he lost his friend Lazarus. So James is not telling us that we need somehow to make ourselves put on a happy face when in fact a normal person would be feeling grief.

Secondly, James is not suggesting this as a pastoral strategy for helping people in the midst of trials. When you go to the funeral home to visit someone who has just lost a loved one, you don’t want your opening line to be, “Well,

brother, just count it all joy." Again, Jesus did not do so when Lazarus died. He entered into their pain and wept with Mary and Martha.

What, then, could James possibly mean? Let me help answer that question by asking another. Have you ever known a person whose life is dominated by the emotion of anger? It's not that this person is angry all the time, but rather that anger is never far from the surface and is the most common response of that person to life situations. So when things don't go as planned, whether it is with one's children, other drivers on the road, co-workers or a spouse, the quick response is that of anger. Everyone close to this person is forced to learn to "walk on eggshells" lest anger be triggered, which happens easily. The angry person has a grid through which all things pass, and the grid says, "I am in control and you better not fail to cooperate with my agenda." That's exactly what James is talking about, if we replace joy with anger. The person who learns to "count it all joy" has a grid through which everything passes, and this grid is what leads to a dominant joy.

James tells us what this grid is. He says that we are to count it all joy when we encounter various trials because of something we know. Our mind is to help our emotions. What we know is that **"the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."** In other words, trials strengthen our faith. Why is that important? Keep reading. **"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."** Think about that last phrase, "lacking in nothing." This speaks of contentment, the person who can say at all times, "I have everything I need right now to be satisfied with life." Remember, it is the person who has experienced loss through trials who can say this after her faith has been strengthened. Can you imagine such a life? There is such trust in God that even the most challenging trial cannot rob this person of a pervasive joy in life.

The path James outlines here for contentment and joy could be rightly characterized as the narrow path as opposed to the broad road. The broad road, walked by many, is that joy depends on getting what I want in life. Such a goal assumes that there is a life out there when everything runs according to my plan. Does such a life really exist? Notice the adjective James uses to describe our trials. He calls them "various," a word that means "diversified, complex, intricate." A realistic view of life sees it as one trial after another. Some single people think that their biggest trial is the loneliness of the single state, and once they get married everything will be better. But they simply trade one trial for another. No longer is loneliness their biggest trial. They find it replaced by the trial of learning to live in peace with another person. Parents often follow the same pattern as their children grow, thinking that as soon as their baby sleeps through the night, everything will be better. But they find that childrearing is a pattern of trading one set of trials for another. And it doesn't end when the nest empties and the children move out on their own. And it doesn't end with retirement, either. The honest truth is that if you don't

have contented joy now, there is no change of circumstances that will give it to you. What will give it to you, according to James, is a strengthened faith. And trials are what serve to strengthen your faith. Trials are the medicine we need. So we “count it all joy” because we have learned to value the outcome: strengthened faith leading to contentment. Imagine you are diagnosed with cancer, and it is a form of cancer that can be cured with a medicine that will bring great suffering to you but works almost every time. Would you take the medicine? Of course you would, and you would be thankful for it. Trials are the medicine needed to strengthen our faith and give us contentment.

One of the characters in John Bunyan’s allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, is a man by the name of “Little-Faith.” On his journey to the Celestial City he is robbed of his money and possessions. The only thing he has left is the scroll given to him as his admittance to the Celestial City. Speaking of that scroll, Bunyan writes:

It might have been great comfort to him, had he used it as he should; but they that told me the story said that he made but little use of it all the rest of the way, and that [was] because of the dismay that he had in the taking away of his money. Indeed he forgot it a great part of the rest of his journey; and besides, when at any time it came into his mind, and he began to be comforted therewith, then would fresh thoughts of his loss come again upon him and those thoughts would swallow up all.

II. The Faith Brought about by This Medicine

So trials are used of God to strengthen our faith, after which we learn contentment, not lacking anything. But there’s a problem. Most of us don’t see life this way. When trials come, all we want is for things to get better. We want the trial to end. What we lack, according to James, is wisdom from God. As our faith is strengthened, we learn to go to God for such wisdom. So this next section really describes what strengthened faith looks like. I notice four characteristics.

First, strengthened faith is honest about our needs. It is able to acknowledge a lack of wisdom. **“If any of you lacks wisdom”** he says. When our faith is strengthened, we become less certain about our conclusions in life and more certain about God’s promises and his commands. It is dangerous when I assume that I know what is best for my life, because it shuts down my heart to God and his direction for me. When our faith has been strengthened by the hardship of trials, we learn the kind of humility that makes us quick to conclude, “I lack wisdom.”

Second, this kind of faith believes in a generous God. James tells those who lack wisdom to ask of God, and to make sure they ask in faith. He defines what

he means by asking in faith by saying that the God he asks gives generously to all without reproach. Somehow, we have fallen into the error of thinking that asking in faith is something like the power of positive thinking. It means that we believe that we already have what we are asking for. That is closer to faith in faith than faith in God. James is saying something very different from the power of positive thinking. He is saying that we need to remember who God is, that he is a God who delights in giving. And when he gives, he does so generously. He gives without reproach, or as another translation words it, "without finding fault." Do you know people whose giving is marked by finding fault? They look for reasons not to give, always wanting to find the perfect recipient of their giving, one completely deserving of such gifts. "I'm not going to help you with that homework assignment because you should have started earlier." Or, "I'm not going to contribute to your 'Go Fund Me' campaign because I've seen you make some unwise purchases." If God were to do that, he would never give anything, because he sees everything about us and knows our faults completely. But he doesn't stop giving as a result of that.

When you pray and ask God for such things as wisdom, it is critical that you see him as a generous God. That's why Jesus began the Lord's Prayer as he did: "Our *Father*." He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, full of mercy and grace. He is not a stingy God, waiting on us to make our case in order to persuade an otherwise reluctant God to act on our behalf. He is predisposed to generosity toward undeserving sinners like you and me. The inclusion of James in the New Testament has been a matter of controversy at times in the history of the church. The great reformer, Martin Luther, at one time thought that James should not be included, though he later changed his mind. The most common reason stated for this position is that James is seen as inadequately focused on the gospel. I disagree, and find in statements like this one a consistency with the rest of the New Testament.

Third, strengthened faith stabilizes life through its many and unavoidable storms. The one whose faith doubts the generosity of God is described in four ways in verses 6-8. He is **"like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind."** To the ancient Jewish mind, the sea is a metaphor of the chaos and evil of life. Life is filled with seemingly chaotic, evil forces. How can a person navigate through such chaos? Without faith in a generous God, one becomes like a wave that is directed by forces outside himself. He doesn't go where he wants to go but where circumstances drive him. He is passive and just lets things happen. After saying that this person's prayers will not be answered, he says that he is **"double-minded."** He can't make up his mind and commit to something because he is always seeing that more information might become available in the future. Some people could be characterized as "Ready, Fire, Aim" people. But those James has in mind are probably more in the camp of "Ready, Aim... Aim... Aim again.." but who never can quite pull the trigger. This is one of the biblical explanations for our modern fear of commitment. Double-minded people have a hard time committing to a course

of action, and the problem is a lack of faith. There comes a time after we pray for wisdom from God that we simply need to pull the trigger and act. The lack of doing so makes one unstable, James says, in all his ways. He is unable to navigate the challenges and complexities of life, not because of a problem with his intellect, but because of a deficiency of faith.

In the last paragraph of our passage, James gives an application of what this wisdom looks like in the area of money. What does this kind of wisdom look like for someone who is poor? How can a poor person, who suffers daily from a lack of adequate money, be characterized as “complete, lacking in nothing” (v. 4). The person in that situation should ask God for the kind of wisdom that makes a difference in daily life. If he does so, he will receive from his generous God a Spirit-given joy in his exaltation. He will be reminded with power that as a co-heir with Christ, he owns everything. It’s just that he won’t come into his inheritance until his exaltation with Christ.

How about the rich person? I believe James is speaking here of the Christian who is rich, not, as he does later in the book, of the sinfully rich. James assumes that the rich do not escape trials either. Their trials are very different from those of the poor, but present nonetheless. It is hard for the poor to understand this. What did Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* say? After the young student Perchik says, “Money is the world’s curse,” Tevye responds famously, “May the Lord smite me with it. And may I never recover.” But the rich Christian has a significant struggle with the power of money, for which wisdom is needed. God will give it, just as he did to the poor person. And when he does, this is what it will look like. He will be able to resist the peculiar temptation of money to think oneself superior to others, and will instead recognize that he is nothing but a wretch who has been rescued by God’s mercy. As one commentator worded it, “To his financial adversities, the poor brother says, ‘But how rich I am!’ To his earthly glories, the rich brother says, ‘But what a wretch I am!’ Each keeps life in the perspective of eternity” (Motyer, p. 43).

CONCLUSION:

Something we are going to see throughout James is the importance of application. He wants us to fight this tendency to keep our faith superficial by asking us to move it from our head to our heart and hands. Can we do that right now? What is an area of your life where you are encountering a trial of some type? Will you ask God for wisdom? You will know when he has given you such wisdom because you will find yourself experiencing joy.