

The Joy of Suffering (James 1:2-8)

As we saw last week in my introduction, I believe the main theme of James is genuine faith; ie. “faith that works,” “faith that endures,” “faith that saves.” With this in mind, James begins the letter with a command to “count it all joy” as the various trials of this life come to us. This life is short and full of troubles. And we can’t always control what happens to us. But, by faith, we can learn to THINK about trials in a certain way. AND, by faith, we can learn to RESPOND in a way that “counts it all joy.” Now, the word “all” here does not emphasize EVERY trial (though every trial is an occasion for rejoicing). It is an adverb describing the KIND of joy. A good translation might be “altogether joy,” or “pure joy,” or “complete joy.” This word “all” is used in 1 Pet. 2:18 referring to slaves as they show a particular kind of respect to their masters. **“Servants, be subject to your masters with ALL respect . . .”** This is “whole-hearted,” “genuine,” or “sincere” respect.

This does not mean that James doesn’t believe we should have other reactions to trials besides rejoicing. This would be unrealistic. Usually, joy is not the first thing we think of during a trial. James’ point, rather, is that trials should be an occasion for genuine rejoicing. The greatest trial ever was the cross of Christ. On the one hand, Jesus was in anguish for the trial of the cross. In the Garden, he cried out, *“let this cup pass before me . . .”* But, at the same time the Book of Hebrews tells us to: **“look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”** This means that suffering and trials are an occasion for us to rejoice. This was James’ desire. This is my desire (both for myself and for all of you). This text, I hope, will help as we understand better what this means for us as we face trials. So, my question I want to answer in this sermon is this: “What does faith look like in such a person who obeys the command to “count it all joy?” I have 3 truths with some applications.

1. **A Steadfast Faith**. The one who counts it all joy has a faith that endures. Look at v. 3: **“For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness . . .”** In v. 2, James says that various kinds of “trials” are coming. This word has two meanings: 1) outward trial or process of testing; or 2) temptation to sin. And sometimes the word is used to mean both at the same time because a temptation to sin is also a trial or a test. But, here in v. 2 and this context, it is clear James is referring to a trial, a test, a difficulty in life that tests faith. For his readers in the 1st century, it was religious persecution, the loss of home and wealth, the rich taking the poor to court, the withholding of wages, and living as a refugee. And these things were a “test” of their faith. And he reminds them that this “testing” produces steadfastness, endurance, perseverance.

This word, “steadfastness” carries the idea of “remaining under.” The picture is a person who successfully carries a heavy load for a long time. The NT often emphasizes this quality. We see the same word with the parable of the sower. Luke 8:15 says, **“As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”** Paul admonishes the believers in 2 Thess. 1:4: **“Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.”** In these passages the emphasis is on the person who endures. But, in our passage with James the emphasis is on the trial that causes endurance.

Let me give an illustration. Fathers, have you ever been on a hike with a 3-year-old? It may start out well. And you may say to your child, I know you want to go on this hike, but I'm not carrying you when you get tired. I will not "remain under" the weight of your body. Yeah right? I don't know how many times I've carried my kids . . . somewhere (airports, in the snow, up a hill, on a hike). But, what alternative do you have? Crying, whining, "exhausted" 3-year-old who is not going anywhere if you don't carry him/her. Fathers/mothers, what do you do? You endure, not necessarily because you want to do it. But instead, it is your child, and this causes you to endure. Though it is difficult, you press on with steadfastness. In the same kind of way, the trials of this life produce steadfastness, for the one who has faith. For the one with faith endures to the end.

Application: When do we see steadfastness, endurance, in our lives? It is displayed during trials. This message is for the Christian, the one who really has faith. If you are not a Christian, don't expect the trials of this life to produce anything in you but grumbling and complaining and worse. There must be faith, and faith is not genuine if it not connected to Christ. If not, trust him!

But, if you are a Christian, trials and sufferings are the training centers (the weight room) of faith. It is where endurance is displayed. Religious persecution, ridicule, prison, the plundering of property was the occasion for endurance to James' readers. Our setting is different right now. But we still have sickness, some religious persecution, other trials with caring for loved ones, raising kids, difficulties in marriage, etc. Life is short and full of troubles. But, if we have faith, God uses our trials and sufferings to refine us. And because of this, we rejoice.

2. A Maturing Faith. The one who counts it all joy has a faith that is maturing. When faith is tested, the immediate result is perseverance, steadfastness. But, in v. 4 James moves past endurance. He says that endurance leads to maturity. "**And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**" In this verse, we see the same word used two times (*telios*). In the Greek, the meaning is "perfect." But, if we look at this word in the OT, the meaning is "complete" or "mature." And considering the context, I think the meaning is clear. James is writing to suffering Christians under trial. And as they endure these hardships and their faith is tested, they grow in maturity. And as they grow in maturity, they lack nothing in their display of godliness.

Paul teaches the same thing, just stated differently. In 1 Thess. 4:1-3 he says, "**Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification.**" And what is sanctification? It is the process of growing in godliness for the people of God. It is moving on to maturity . . . until we die, or until Christ comes back. And in these verses, James ties this process with endurance through various trials and sufferings. And, apparently, knowing this truth results in joy.

Think about weightlifting, muscles that mature. I'm not very strong compared to Caleb H. (neither are you.) But, think about all the training he has done through the years. Little by little through the years, he has trained by tearing his muscles down, and then eating and sleeping, as they build up stronger than they were before. And compared to when he first began lifting, think

how many more reps on the pull up bar he can do now. In the same kind of way, the trials of life build a strong, maturing faith. I will try and apply this truth for a moment.

Let me ask, “*Does merely knowing this truth produce a heart that rejoices?*” It helps, But, I don’t think this comes easily. I think the underlying truth is that in this world of sin and death and sickness and undeniable heartache, God is more concerned with our godliness and the beauty of our faith than with our comfort. And the further we move on in maturity, the more we understand this; the more we are able to rejoice.

Also, in the providence of God, this attitude of rejoicing is good for us as we live in this world of sin. I must ask, “*Which of us will avoid the various trials of this life?*” “*Which of us will escape suffering in this life?*” Merely knowing this is God’s plan for you is GOOD! It is comforting to KNOW that “**God works all things to good, those who love him and are called according to his purpose**” (Rom. 8:28). And with what kind of attitude do you want to go through this life?

App. Those with the greatest faith have endured the greatest trials. (See Heb. 11). Why should we expect anything different? It is not that we look for trials and sufferings. I see no real evidence of this in the Scriptures. **THEY WILL COME.** They are through the next door, over the next hill. But, when they come, and we endure them by faith, and we know that **THROUGH** these trials God is working in us to sanctify us and prepare us for heaven, we **CAN REJOICE.** By the power of God we can “count it all joy.” This is why this text is so important for us today . . . and tomorrow . . . and the day after that . . . etc.

3. A Consistent Faith. Look at v. 5: “**If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.**” In this verse I think James is trying to apply vv. 2-4. When we see the trials of our lives through the eyes of God, through the purposes of God, through the lens of sovereign providence, we become wise. In other words, if you are struggling with endurance and the process of maturity in the midst of your trials, then ask God. He will give you wisdom.

We will see the theme of wisdom often with James. In 3:13: “**Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.**” In 3:15: “**This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.**” And in 3:17: “**But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.**” To James, godly living IS wisdom. And this wisdom comes from God, who is the source of all wisdom. And as we go through this life of trials, we are always asking God to give us wisdom, “*Lord help me endure, give me grace to move on to maturity.*” “*Lord, you know I don’t understand all your ways, but I do understand that you are all-wise, Lord, give me wisdom.*” This kind of faith is a faith that is consistent; it can look no further than the source of all wisdom, God Himself. And God is One. And God cannot be divided. When we ask for wisdom, and that is truly what we want, this is exactly what God will give. He cannot do otherwise.

James is taking his cue from Jesus when he said in the Sermon on the Mount: “**Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you . . . Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you them, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how**

much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:7-11). And then Jesus says, **“Everyone then who hears these words of mind and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock . . . and everyone who hears these words of mind will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand . . .”** (Matt. 7:24-27).

Now, look at vv. 6-8. James speaks of a “faith” that is not consistent, a faith that is not genuine, a faith that does not endure and mature. He says, **“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”** Here, James is saying that a particular kind of person will receive nothing from God. He likens this person to the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind, double-minded, and unstable. Think about a person floating in the ocean. What can he do but come and go with the waves, the wind, and the tide? One day, he is over here, the next over there.

So what does this look like? Well, one day, this person believes one thing about God, the next day, he believes something else. This person prays according to the shifting desires of his heart. One day he wants wisdom from the world, the next day he wants wisdom from God. This person does not pray with sincerity of purpose. Their faith is not grounded. This person does not possess an “anchor for his soul” (Heb. 6:19). There is no consistency in their asking. And, there is no consistency in their actions.

In this text, we see the word “doubt.” If you’re like me, you see the word “doubt” and you automatically think, *“Oh no, I doubt.”* Which of us does not doubt from time to time? We doubt God will give us what ask in faith. We doubt our loyalty. Sometimes, we doubt because we don’t understand something. Well, this isn’t the kind of doubt James is speaking of. This is our English translation. But, our context is clear. Just because you doubt occasionally, doesn’t necessarily mean you are unstable or double minded. Paul uses this same word to describe the faith of Abraham as he considered the promise of God to give him a son in his old age. In Rom. 4:20-21, we read, **“No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”** But, we know that at least once, Abraham “doubted,” in the way we think of doubt. Both he and Sarah laughed (Gen. 17:15-18).

Examples abound in the Bible as God’s people have times of doubt. This text does not teach (as many have taught) that if we doubt in this way, God will not answer. (*“Just have faith and God will answer.” “If you have enough faith, you will have wealth and prosperity.”*) This is nonsense. I believe James is basing these words on the teaching of Jesus who says, **“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other”** (Matt. 6:24). Therefore, a “doubting” person, a “double-minded” person, an “unstable” person serves two masters.

At the end of the day, James is telling us to wholeheartedly and single-mindedly trust the character and the promises of God. (App. for the non-Christian. Do not sit on the fence.)

As I conclude with some applications, I must remind us of our great example, the Lord Jesus Christ. Heb. 12: 2 says, “**look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**” The greatest trial ever was endured by Jesus. And it was a joy. Why? His unwavering, undivided, desire to do the will of God . . . for our sakes. And for us, God’s will is to endure the trials of this life. And through these trials, we are being sanctified as we trust consistently, whole-heartedly in God.

App. Do not be surprised when suffering comes your way. Peter says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet. 4:12-13). In prosperity gospel preaching and teaching, one must be surprised! For it is not supposed to happen to me (best life now nonsense).

App. The outcome of endurance, maturity, and consistency of faith in God’s promises leads to the glory of God. For who else can give such faith? When the world sees how we react to the trials and sufferings of this life, glory can only go to God.

App. (follows the last one) It is not about us. It is about God working in us. Through trials, God is not giving us faith. He has already done that. But, through these trials, He is strengthening our faith for endurance. He is adding to our faith maturity. This is sanctification. And we ask with undivided, unwavering faith. And the outcome is to “count it all joy.”