

JOY IN SUFFERING

James 1:1-12

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How well do you cope with hard times in life? I was a bit bemused when I read the story of an old dog that fell into a farmer's well. After thinking about it, the farmer decided that neither the dog nor the well were worth saving. So, he decided to bury the old dog and put him out of his misery. When the farmer began shoveling the dog was hysterical. But as the farmer kept on shoveling, and the dirt hit his back, a thought struck the old dog. Each time a shovel of dirt hit his back, the dog would shake off the dirt and step up. No matter how painful those shovels of dirt were, the old dog fought his panic. He just kept shaking it off and stepping up. Finally, the dog, battered and exhausted, stepped triumphantly over the wall of that well. What he thought would bury him actually benefitted him because of the way he handled his adversity. So, we could say, perseverance is the ability to shake it off and step up when a load of trials is dumped on you.

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote his letter to a group of Christians who were doing it tough. They were Jewish Christians who had been part of the church at Jerusalem. But after Stephen was martyred the Christians were persecuted. They had fled their homes, losing everything. They faced a very difficult time. They found themselves in unfamiliar places. They had become poor and not necessarily wanted by their new communities. In that sense they were refugees. You can imagine the temptation to give up their faith. 'What's the good of believing in Jesus? Look where it leaves us. If Jesus is Lord of all, as the apostles taught us, how come we suffer so much?' That's why James immediately begins his letter with an encouragement. But, it is an encouragement that may at first surprise us. For James does not suggest that God will bring relief. Rather they should consider their trials with joy. His approach here has to do with their attitude to their situation. The reason some people struggle, and others thrive in similar circumstances, is their difference in attitude. As Winston Churchill put it 'Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference'.

James says (James 1:2-4) "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ..." On first impression you would be inclined to say 'Can that be right? Does James mean they should be happy because they are persecuted? Should

they say, 'Thank you Lord, that we have lost everything?' If one of us is sick or you have lost your job, should we say 'Thank you God for no work with a pile of bills to pay? Thank you, God, for this sickness. It is pure joy for me!' That's ridiculous. But if we read the whole sentence we realize James is not saying that. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." Do you see it? The joy is not for the trial itself. But for what God does with it. The trial 'tests' faith. It proves it. It makes the faith real and stretches it. And that 'produces perseverance.' At the end of June, I had numerous essays to mark for the RTC students. Why do we get them to write lengthy papers? To test their knowledge. To have them prove they have gained understanding so they can move onto Semester 2. Trials test our faith, showing its strength which develops our perseverance and the ability to go on.

Let me clarify something. The trials we go through in life can be sickness, loss, loneliness, persecution for our beliefs. These things are due to the sin that has come into God's perfect creation. The trials we face come about because of our own sin, or the sin of someone else, or the curse of sin on creation in general. It is not God throwing things at us in some capricious manner to try us out. They are certainly not things that were originally meant to be. Nor, do we long for these things. We are right to pray for relief. As Christians we do not just passively receive injustice or sickness or persecution. We must struggle for freedom and righteousness. We should strive for cures for disease. And we plead God for answers. But the issue is when we do 'face trials of many kinds', deep down there can still be joy because we know it is not all meaningless suffering. As we said from Ecclesiastes, that is the pain and disillusionment for many who live without God. But the Bible shows that God, in his providence, uses those trials to 'test' our faith. And as we learn to 'persevere', to 'hang in there', our faith grows stronger.

I am saying this not just as a theological idea. This is my own experience. Looking back, I can remember tough times I prayed harder and held tighter onto God. That's what happens. When we are down, when our pride is stripped away, or our health gives in, we look again more closely for God. We tend to reach for God in those times and cling to him. We are more aware of his presence because we are looking for him in our prayers. At those moments we are more aware of his love and provision. We long for his forgiveness and grace. We have to admit, if we are honest, it's not the good times that bring us closer to God. It's the struggles in life that have brought us closer to God. And that is worth rejoicing about. That is why James says, "Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds." The hard times remove the weak spots in our faith. Whether it be pride, or selfishness or whatever. We can say that trials test and

strengthen our faith. They keep us humble. They wean us off worldly things. They reveal what we really love. They lead us to a hope now and for the future with God. In other words, they make us more "...mature, complete, lacking in nothing." And that is what it's all about. Paul writes (Ephesians 4:13) "...that we become mature, attaining to the measure of the fullness of Christ." That is why we can consider trials with joy. Because by them we are becoming more like Jesus. And, that is the whole point of being Christian. We are the body of him who brought forgiveness and hope by suffering. He is the one who said, "Take up your cross and follow me". Jesus is the template God uses as he keeps working on us, as he keeps rubbing and cutting and twisting and molding us.

Now we have to admit it is not easy to feel this joy when we go through the trial. It takes wisdom from God to appreciate the pain is being used to make us more Christlike. So, James tells his readers how to prayer for wisdom, which he says is not difficult to obtain (James 1:5) "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, ... and it will be given to you." Note also how James says "...ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault..." God's very nature is to be gracious. To be generous. He loves to give. He wants very much to give wisdom. And he will do it 'without finding fault'. God will not scold us for our lack of wisdom. He will not find fault because we struggle or have foolish thoughts. He will not chide us because we keep coming back, asking yet again for wisdom because we still can't see the point of our suffering. God gives generously because the whole point is to have us grow in maturity and understanding. The word 'generous' in the Greek is 'single.' That is, God is single minded in his concern for us to grow in faith. That is what he deeply desires. We know that because it cost God so much to have us as his children. God himself suffered watching his Son struggling in hell. It impacts on him to see our pain in our struggles. So, he will give, and give again every time we ask for wisdom.

God will not chide us for lack of understanding and our constant requests. But if we doubt God, then we will (James 1:6) "...not receive anything from the Lord" says James. He is saying God is utterly sincere in us getting wisdom. But are we sincere in seeking God's wisdom? James exhorts his readers that when they ask for wisdom, they "...must believe and not doubt..." He says the doubter is a "...double minded person and unstable in all they do'. The Greek word is 'two souled'. In other words, the doubter is living two lives. They are going in two directions. On the one hand the person asks for wisdom from God. But on the other hand, doubts God and they rely on their own wisdom. It makes the doubter 'unstable'. They are "...like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind". James knew the waters of Lake Galilee well. Surrounded by hills the winds are often erratic, tossing the waves in all directions. So it is with the doubter.

One minute the person is here, the next there. One minute asking God. The next relying on their own ideas. For example, a business man loses a fortune in a bad deal. He prays 'God, please give me wisdom. Why is this happening?' It might be that God uses the trial to teach the man to rely more on God rather than on money as his security. But instead of trusting God and learning the lesson, he refers again to his own wisdom. He thinks 'I still think you need lots of money in the bank to be secure and happy.' So, he sets off on another big money project. That man did not receive any wisdom from God. Why? Well he rejected it. He remains unstable. If we are not secure with God, ultimately, we are not secure at all. To receive wisdom to understand our trial and learn from it, we must quietly and simply trust God. As the Catechism (Lord's Day 9) puts it; "I trust him so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and he will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world." Trust God. Then as we pray for wisdom we will get it. We will learn and grow.

In the last few verses of our text James provides us with an example of this wisdom. (James 1:9-12) "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. In the eyes of worldly wisdom many of the Jewish Christians James wrote to were regarded as being 'of low position'. They had lost their property and positions in society. They were persecuted and scattered. If they had given up their faith in Jesus, then they could again have improved their position. But their refusal to give up the faith made things difficult. Does James pity them? Does he allow them to pity themselves? No, the very opposite. Godly wisdom says, 'You need to change your attitude and see things differently'. In fact, James says to them 'Boast!' "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position". James wants the wisdom of God to open their eyes and see to what height they have reached. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are the children of God. Through faith in Jesus they are heirs of God, coheirs with Christ. They usher in the very kingdom of God. So, are they poor? Not by God's standards. But for the Christians who were still rich materially, Godly wisdom makes them boast, not in their earthly riches. But they are to "take pride in their humiliation, since they will pass away like a wild flower." They are to acknowledge that they are but creatures of God. Because for all their wealth they are just like the wild flower that withers with the scorching heat. So, they boast not in their wealth but who they are in God. It is not they who are great but God, who provides all things. That is how godly wisdom sees things.

John Eldredge on his Facebook page tells the story of a Scottish discus thrower from the 19th century. He lived in the days before professional trainers and developed his skills alone in the highlands. He made his own discus from the description he read in

a book. What he didn't know was that the competition discus was made of wood with an outer rim of iron. His discus was made of solid metal, four times heavier than the ones used by his would-be challengers. This committed Scotsman trained day after day, laboring under the burden of extra weight. He marked the record distance and kept working until he could throw that far. Of course, when he arrived at the competition, he was handed the official wooden discus. He threw it like a tea saucer. He set new records and for many years none of his competitors couldn't touch him. As Eldridge reflect on the story he said, 'So that's how you do it. Train under a great burden and you will be so far beyond the rest of the world you will be untouchable.' Some of us here may be training under a great burden. It hurts. It is unpleasant. Sometimes we despair. Sometimes we cry. Sometimes we are angry about the burden. But take heart. We can always have a deep sense of joy. Because the burden is producing perseverance. Perseverance is producing maturity. Neither of these virtues, so prized by God, would ever be ours without the burden. Our burdens can make us better than we ever imagined. Stronger, more patient, more courageous, more gentle, more loving than we could otherwise be. As Job said (Job 23:10) "...when [God] has tested me, I will come forth as gold." James spells out the ultimate blessing of persevering with our trials "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." Or as Paul put it (2 Corinthians 4:17) "Therefore we do not lose heart...For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all".