



PROBLEMS - FAITH BUILDERS OR FAITH BUSTERS

Pastor Al Detter James 1:1-18

5:30, 9:15 & 11:00am Grace Church May 17-18, 2008

James is one of the most practical books in the Bible. It's more a series of little sermons than it is a cozy letter. In this series, we're really going to get a lot of relevant insight into life where it's really lived.

I want to spend a moment setting up the book. So let's take a look at verse 1. The author is identified in the 1st word of the book—James. Actually, his real name was Jacob, and it came over to English, perhaps by mistake as James. (Some believe that King James insisted on this name when the 1611 King James Version came out.) I mention Jacob because Jacob is the #1 name for baby boys in America for the 9th year running.

We're pretty sure that this James was the half-brother of Jesus. He was converted after the resurrection of Christ (Jn. 7:5; I Cor. 15:7) and became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. We know the Apostle James didn't pen this book because he was slain with the sword (Acts 12:2) before this letter was written. The James who wrote this letter was himself stoned to death in AD 62 (says ancient historian Josephus).

James continues in verse 1—"a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ". James was a humble man. He didn't exalt himself as a brother of Christ. He considered himself a servant, a slave under the mastership of the Father and the Son. His life was not his own.

James is writing to a group he identifies as the 12 tribes of the Dispersion. The early church was distinctively Jewish in nature and because of persecution, had been scattered across the expanse of the Roman Empire. So this book is not to a specific church. James was banking on the fact that it would be passed around over many miles wherever there were refugees.

Our best estimates for the date of the writing of James are between AD 45 and 48, 1 of the earliest books in the New Testament. (The Book of Revelation tells us that God will regather the scattered 12 tribes in the end times.)

The 1st subject James deals with is the variety of external problems and trials and difficulties that come to us in life. Sorry. When you become a Christian, God doesn't take problems away from us. They often find us like magnets. And sometimes, these trials put us in a quandary. How do we reconcile a loving and blessing God with the pain that we feel? It can be quite problematic.

As we enter our passage today, verse 2 says something almost ridiculous. "Count it all joy (charan) when you meet up with trials that come in all shapes and sizes." Wouldn't you rather have it read, "Count it all joy when you escape trials?" But James says, "Count it all joy when trials fall upon you like a robber (peripasete)."

What would you think if you came into my office and said, "We just had a miscarriage," and I would say, "Look on the bright side. Let me see your happy face." I think you'd be stunned and perhaps walk out of my office.

The people James is writing to are under lots of stress. They have little or no money. The Jews and the Romans are persecuting them. Some are cut off from family and friends. Many of them have no real place to call home. And James is telling them to count their trials as an opportunity for joy? It's actually a wonder that this letter survived.

James is saying that we can't let our emotions rule our lives. Our problems soaked in our emotions will pull us down and sour us as a Christian. We have to use our minds to reframe the inevitable problems that come our way in order for us to see any kind of joyful payoff. It isn't natural to count it joy when suffering. We're going to have to cultivate this response.

Stan Sulecki, a Christian Erie man, wrote a book called, *Dear Stormy*. It's in the bookstore. It's a fictional story about his real relationship with me. In the book, David Drayer meets up with stranger Pastor Mike Detter in Carl's Diner. Pastor Mike's 1st words to David are, "So, how are you thinking today?" David says, "What? Most people ask, 'How are you doing?'".

That's the question James is asking here, "How are you thinking?" If he told us to feel joy in trials, it would be impossible. But we can actually think our way to joy, count it joy. By the way, Biblical joy is somewhat hard to define because we associate joy with a pleasant feeling of delight or happiness. That's like "Joy 101".

Joy in the Bible is much deeper than that. Joy is a settled disposition of confidence in God that evokes an unexplainable contentment even in the midst of adverse circumstances. It's a state of mind that emanates in us from God Himself. So inexplicably, I can be in pain and tears and at the same time realize joy.

For a moment, think of a trial that's currently in your life or if you don't have one right now, a recent one. Do you have it in mind? As I go through this passage on trials, see if what James has to say is on target relative to what you're going through. I think you'll see just how perceptive he is.

So how do we think our way to joy? In 17 power-packed, amazingly connected verses, James gives us 6 reasons to regard it as joy when trials come our way. This is so important because trials in our lives have such potential to injure our faith rather than to strengthen it.

Reason #1 to count it joy when trials come—Tested faith produces spiritual maturity (Jas. 1:3-4).

Look at verses 3-4. READ. Don't you wish James would have said, "Bible reading, prayer, going to church, giving, using your spiritual gifts, and fellowship produce maturity"? I do. While they're all important, only 1 thing produces Christ-like character and maturity in us—trials.

James says that his readers already "know" that. I think many of us do as well. But if you don't know that trials are the major way maturity is produced in us, you'll learn that today. Once we know that, our job is to remember what we know about trials. Because most of us have short memories in the trial.

James says that trials "test (dokimion)" our faith. This word "test" means "to prove the nature of something". James is saying that our faith must undergo a process to see whether or not it's genuine. A trial will reveal the nature of our faith.

When we got to building our church, we had to have a perk test done on the soil. We needed to dig down to the clay to see if there was enough top soil to support a sewer system. There wasn't. The test revealed what the true situation was.

James is saying that a trial is like a perk test. It reveals what our faith is made of. If our faith is genuine, the test actually causes our faith to go into production. True faith will produce something when tested—"steadfastness (hupomenev)" or "endurance". Steadfastness means that we'll do what's right while we ride out the test (vs. 3).

James goes further in verse 4, "Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect (teleioi) and complete (olokleroi)". Paul says almost the identical thing in Romans 5:3-4, "We rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character". The goal isn't patience while tested. It's patience that leads to more maturity of character. We're going to become more like Christ as a result of our trials.

We're going to keep getting these tests and we hope to make more and more progress. And then 1 day, the tests will be over. We'll be with the Lord finished and fully developed. It won't quite happen this side of Heaven.

So James is saying, "If you think your way to the result of the trial—maturity, you can count the result as joy even though the trial is terrible." You have to think your way to joy. You won't be able to feel your way to joy.

Well, what do you do if you say, "This trial is so bad, thinking my way to joy might be good for James, but I can't do it." That leads us to Reason #2.

Reason #2 to count it all joy when trials come—God will give us the wisdom to count our trials as joy if we ask Him (Jas. 1:5-8).

Look at verse 5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God." For years I thought that these verses were talking about if you needed wisdom in general, just ask God and He'll give it to you. I think you can do that, but these verses aren't talking about asking God for any kind of wisdom that you might need.

These verses are connected to the preceding verses. James is telling us that if we can't see any way the test is good for us, if we can't think our way to joy, we need to ask God for the wisdom to see the test as working something good in us.

Maybe you're different from me, but my 1st response to trials is not, "Oh what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day, I have a wonderful feeling, everything's going my way." I resist trials. I tend to have a bad reaction. I tend to murmur and complain, maybe even get angry. Maybe I'm the only one like this here. But my point is—thinking our way to joy isn't natural. It's not the way we're wired. A trial is an interruption to our pleasure and comfort and plans. We don't like pain. You see, we live in a world that despises trouble. We want to rid ourselves of it any way we can so we can be happy. That, my friend, is the wisdom of this age. That's why so many Christians make bad decisions in times of trouble. They're thinking like this world.

True wisdom is seeing all of life from God's perspective. His wisdom is radically different from the wisdom of this world. If we're able to see that God is maturing us through our trials, we'll be able to count it joy when the waves of trials wash over us. We need to get this wisdom from God or we'll chafe under our problems all our lives and reap absolutely no benefit.

So if you realize that you're not seeing your trials from God's point of view, James tells us to ask God for that kind of wisdom. In fact, James says that God will be generous with it. He'll give you wisdom and not demean you if you ask.

You see, we're slow learners and sometimes we have to keep asking God for wisdom in our trials. In verse 5 James says God won't reproach us. God isn't going to make us feel like we're a bother to Him. He's not going to say, "How dumb can you be?" Rather, Martin Luther put it this way, "When we're struggling, God won't rebuff us lest anyone should fear to come to God too often".

But there's a condition for getting this wisdom. Resolve. You have to believe that God will give it to you. That doesn't mean you might have some minor doubts. It means that in the trial, if you ask for wisdom but really don't believe that God will give it to you, you won't get it. You have to believe that God knows what He's doing and that He'll help you to understand that your trial will produce some good result.

(James makes it clear in verses 6 and 8 that if you really doubt that God can assist you when you ask Him, you're "double-minded" or "double-souled", a spiritual schizo-phrenic. You're vacillating so that even if God would answer you, you'd doubt Him and be like a wave tossed by the wind.)

I'm here to tell you, if you really can't see any benefit from your trial, then believe in a God so incredible that He knows what's going on. Ask Him without serious doubt and He'll help you to see what He showed Joseph and Paul—what looked so bad from man's point of view was being worked out for good from God's point of view (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

I need to add this. When James wrote his little book, none of the rest of the New Testament had yet been written except maybe Galatians. So they had to ask God to help them understand trials. Today, we have the entire New Testament. When we ask God for wisdom, guess what He's going to do? Tell us to get into His Word. The Bible is how we get to see life and trials from God's point of view.

Reason #3 to count it all joy when trials come—Money gives no one an advantage in trials (Jas. 1:9-11).

Marie and I were at the Hearst Castle in California recently. I have never seen more evidence of wealth in my life. Some people really do live much better than others. But when it comes to trials, James is saying that money is irrelevant whether you're rich or poor.

In verses 9-11, James is telling us the true condition of the rich and the poor that we wouldn't really know naturally. The lowly brother, the poor Christian in verse 9 is actually rich in eternal value. He's an heir to the inheritance of Jesus Christ. So the poor person is not to despair. A day of exaltation is coming after all the trials in which he can count it joy right now. And you can't buy that with money!

But the tables are reversed for the unbelieving rich in verses 10-11. They may have the money now and they may even limit their trials with it. But when you put the lens of eternity on the rich, they'll pass away quickly like grass under the scorching sun, and while his money talked in time, it will be worthless in eternity.

My opinion of these verses is that James is referring to the unbelieving rich. In chapter 2:6-7, James identifies the rich as those who persecute Christians and blaspheme God. And in chapter 5:1-6, James lays into the unbelieving rich as meeting a terrible end because they took advantage of the helpless.

Now if I'm wrong about this and it's talking about rich Christians, it would be wrong for them to think that they have an advantage in trials by using their wealth to resist trials in this life only to realize in eternity that the poor were richer than they.

The point James is stressing is that trials come to every-one. When it's all said and done, our money is worthless in trials. Those who think that money talks in trials will be bankrupt on the other side while the godly poor will be doing quite well. If you know this, you can think your way to joy.

REASON #4 to count it all joy when trials come—The one who withstands the test of trials will receive the crown of life (Jas. 1:12).

(This reason reminds me very much of what Jesus told the 7 churches in the book of Revelation—those who overcome trials will receive a reward in Heaven.) James says in verse 12, "Blessed (makarios) is the one who passes the test." That's the same word Jesus used in the Beatitudes when He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, etc." It's a word that means "to be enriched by God to the point of joy" even in the face of trials.

Remember verse 2 when James said, "Count it all joy"? He's dialing into that idea here. And this is the reality. Trials prove a person's faith to be true or false. If a person responds in a Christ-like way in trials, it proves his faith is genuine. If he reacts in ways that dishonor Christ and that's all he ever does, it proves his faith isn't genuine.

So—if the testing of your faith reveals it to be genuine, even though we're not perfect, when we get to Heaven, God will give us a reward called the crown of life which is the evidence that our faith was genuine on earth. There's no way in which we earn eternal life through trials. The crown is the reward for the steadfast evidence that was displayed through trials because of genuine faith.

God promised the crown of life, says James, to all who love Him. Those who love God obey Him and endure. So when you realize that God will honor you with a reward in Heaven for being faithful under trials on earth, you can think your way to joy now.

REASON #5 to count it all joy when trials come—God will never tempt us to do wrong in a trial (Jas. 1:13-15).

That's a great reason to think our way to joy. God isn't baiting us by a problem to lead us into sin. If we end up sinning, James says that it's our fault.

I just want to check something here. Did you ever have a trial in which you sinned? You got mad? You threw some-thing? You used a bad word? You hurt someone with your words? We all have. James is telling us that God didn't lead us down that path through our trial. We did it on our own.

Look at verse 13. "Let no one say when he is..."—ok—we have a Greek word that's been used throughout our passage (peirasmon; peirazomai) that's been translated "test" up to this point. At this spot many versions translate this word as "tempt". The word can have both meanings. The context must decide.

I prefer the word "test" here in verse 13, "Let no one say when he is tested," and here comes the same Greek word but I think this is where it means "tempt"—"I am tempted by God". You see, a trial carries with it the possibility of failure and may be seen as a temptation from God. But James is clear. The testing is never used of God to solicit a sinful response in us. He never desires that we sin as a result of a test. If we're tempted to sin, it's because there's something in us, not in God.

Verses 14-15 are very clear. God can't be tempted with evil and He Himself never tempts anyone to evil. We're tempted when we allow a desire from within to go unchecked. That desire acts like bait. The picture here is of a fish swim-ming along and suddenly darts after some bait.

If we allow desire to persist in us, we bait our own hook. When we take the bait, we sin. And people who continually take the bait of their own desire eventually head towards death. But the more we refuse the bait within, the stronger our character grows. We can conquer the temptations that trials can present.

I think Job demonstrated this point well in Job 1. God allowed trials to test him. Satan said to God, "He'll fail the test. Take away all Your blessings and Job will curse you." God allowed the test but didn't use the test to lead Job towards evil. In the test, Job's faith was proven genuine for the text says, "In all this, Job did not sin or charge God with wrong (Job 1:22)".

So, we can think our way to joy even in the midst of a severe test when we realize that God will never use it to lead us to do wrong. And we can think our way to joy every time we don't take the bait to respond in sin.

REASON #6 to count it all joy when trials come—Proven character is a gift from God (Jas. 1:16-18).

Look at verse 16. It begins, "Do not be deceived". This warning is found a number of times in the New Testament and whenever you find it, it's trying to flag an area in which we're unusually vulnerable to deception. This is 1 of those areas. Trials are easily misunderstood. We may be tempted to believe that trials are bad things in our lives from a supposedly good God.

We seem to have a lot of trouble reconciling suffering with God. And so we often ask the question, "Why do good people suffer?", "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Our 1st impulse is to think that God isn't being fair, that He's shafting us somehow.

But verses 16-18 tell us that rather than being a source of temptation and evil, God is only capable of giving us something good. The trials in our lives are working out what's good for us in the end even though there's a whole lot of pain while going through it. The fruit of maturity comes by trials. When we stand complete in God having been refined by the fire, 1 day we'll see the gift the trials were to us. We'll never see them then as a temptation to sin!

So even though the trial is difficult, James says the outcome is a gift of God who made the lights of the universe—the sun, moon and stars. They may change in intensity and the sun's shadows may shift on earth. But God will never change; He's ever constant. He's capable of giving only good gifts and that will never change.

Now hear me. Of all God's good gifts, the greatest is mentioned in verse 18. It's our salvation! Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God". No trial can ever strip us of that gift (Rom. 8:31-39).

Yes, the trial by itself may be repulsive, but a good outcome is God's gift. Can we reason our way to joy when we realize that by His own will and word, God has saved us to an eternal weight of glory even if for a short season we must endure hardship?

Conclusion

So—how are you thinking? How you think about your trials will pave the way to joy and spiritual maturity or it will lead you into misery, doubt, sin, and distance from God. If we mishandle the trial, we'll never bear the fruit God intends.

What I've shared today is the wisdom of God about trials in the life of a Christian. Honestly, I wouldn't have designed it this way. If I were God, I'd have found a way to remove all pain from the life of a Christian. But God knows what's best. Through the cross He saves us and by trials, He perfects us.

REALITY CHECK—when the test of our faith comes, can we think our way to joy? Can we count it joy

- *Because we grow in character because of trials?**
- *Because God will give us wisdom to understand them?**
- *Because money doesn't really matter in trials?**
- *Because we'll get a crown of life for passing the trials test?**
- *Because God will never tempt us to do evil in trials?**
- *Because proven character is really a gift of God as a result of salvation?**

Friends, if we can think our way through all of these reasons, we'll be able to count it joy when trials assail us. Now, what about the trial you thought of at the beginning of the sermon. How are you thinking? It will make all the difference in the world as to what happens to you.