

Faith Works (James) / Sermon 1: Trials & Temptations

June 5, 2016

Faith Works. If you were here last week, you might remember identified that as the theme of this book: Faith really does work. And James is talking about in the real world, faith really works in the real world. This isn't about some fantasy world that has been scrubbed down and cleaned up. James says, faith will work in your life, no matter how messy it is. That's what we're going to unpack this morning: how faith works when life gets messy. Not if it's messy, but when. And tackling the messes with faith works a whole lot better than facing them without it. So, here we go...

Now ... I suspect you old guys are with me on this one: It's kind of weird how the older we get the more our dreams shrink. When you were little, I suspect you dreamed of playing for the Wildcats, or if you really dreamed big, maybe for the Dallas Cowboys, right? Or maybe your dream was to be a famous musician, with thousands of screaming fans. Or an actor – in the movies, or on TV. Or maybe your dreams were more classic: you dreamed of being the president of the United States, or an astronaut. Or maybe you dreamed of being a great preacher (by the way, that was not one of mine! And you are thinking, that's cool, because you didn't make it!). Or maybe you just dreamed of having a boatload of money.

And if you are old enough, I suspect you have seen your dreams change, just a little. Now you dream of getting out of bed without hurting, or walking up the hill from the barn without your knee killing you (that's one of my dreams). Or maybe you dream of not getting into a fight before you leave the house for work, or for church. Or maybe you dream that you can actually reach the end of the month without going a little further into debt. Or you dream that you can take a real vacation, and although this is going a little far, you dream that you can come home from your vacation actually rested. Or maybe your dream is just to hang on to your job long enough that you can actually retire – that they won't axe you for someone younger, and cheaper. That's the real world for most people, isn't it? Because life gets really hard.

Our dreams are so intermingled with our hopes and fears.

➤ I hope it's not cancer, right?

- I hope my kid will make it out of the 5th grade this time, or that she will survive the bullying somewhat unscathed.
- I hope my husband, or my wife will finally start showing God some respect.
- I hope I can hang on to enough faith to make it through judgment day and get to heaven, instead of hell ... if there is one. Right?
- I hope my physical pain will someday be tolerable, or go away even.
- I hope my emotional pain will someday be tolerable, or go away.
- I hope my relational pain will someday be tolerable, or go away. You keep asking God to make it tolerable, even to make it go away... Well, how's that working out for you?

Well ... people were pretty much the same 2000 years ago when the book of James was written. And he says some things to some messy people like us that we need to hear. Let me read you the section we're going to unpack this morning ...

James says, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. (Well that's kind of weird; almost sounds twisted! He says,) For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." And then he says, "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. (And) He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do." ... couple verses later James says this, he says, "God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, 'God is tempting me.' (In fact, that's almost blasphemy!) God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else."

Now, I love the way James starts this little book. He says, Faith really works, in the real world. Faith works when you need it most. Because -- this is reality -- because we live in a world that is broken, and we are

surrounded by people who are broken, and we are broken. So life is going to be hard sometimes. That's real, even for us Jesus followers. And James just puts it out there, right up front. He says, "Life is hard, sometimes it is really hard. So don't be shocked, Jesus followers, when you have a really hard day." Well, why not? Why shouldn't it rattle us? James is like, "Well I wrote a book; it's in there. I told you trouble was coming. In fact I put it in verse 2. I wasn't sure you'd read the whole thing so I put it right up front where you wouldn't miss it."

He says, "When troubles of any kind come your way, I want you to consider it an opportunity for great joy" ... which is not what usually comes to mind when troubles of any kind come our way. We don't ordinarily see trials as an opportunity for joy, do we? We see trials as an excuse to be grumpy ... sometimes with God. You get sick, you get grumpy; you're having trouble with a parent, or a kid, or a husband, or a wife; you're struggling on your job, you get grumpy. You struggle to pay your bills; or you are in a fight with sin and you are losing; whatever ... Here's what we are tempted to do.

- Sometimes we actually wonder if God is punishing us, for some reason. Every been there, felt that? You are going through a real hard time, and you wonder, "OK, what did I do; what did I do to deserve this?" Listen guys – this is huge. God doesn't punish his people, because he has already punished his Son. Jesus went to the cross, he took on himself all your sin – all of it. He suffered and died in your place. It would not be just to punish both Jesus and you for the same sin. If you are in Christ, you are not being punished by God for your sin. Now sometimes we do reap what we sow. Sometimes when we make bad choices we still suffer the consequences. But God never punishes his people for their sin – because Jesus has already taken that on himself. You need to understand that.
- Or maybe, you're thinking, "God may not be punishing me, but it sure feels like he is failing me." The Bible says he loves me – and I want to believe that. The Bible says he'll provide for me, take care of me – and I want to believe that. But I'm just not seeing it. Now, you may not put it quite so crudely, but you're kind of thinking that God is failing you. Ever been there, felt that? Listen guys, you may

not understand it yet – but God never has, and God never will fail you. He's that good, he's that powerful, and he's that wise. You may not see it yet, but someday you will understand that our Father never, ever fails his kids.

- Or maybe, you're kind of thinking that, well, then maybe God really isn't all that good. He may be powerful, and he may be smart – but he allows so much pain. How could a good God allow his kids to go through so much pain? It kind of feels like he's either not all that powerful, or he's not all that good. Ever been there, felt that? I know some of you have – I've heard you say it. Listen, guys, not everything that happens in this world is God's will. Some Jesus followers think it is, but it's not. There are things that happen in this world that grieve God, that break God's heart. There are things in your life that grieve God, that break his heart ... things that he will straighten out someday ... but not yet. Till then it's going to take a boatload of trust.

Bottom line, guys, life in this world is going to get hard sometimes ... which is why we need to understand, faith works. Just look at the word James uses. He says, "When trials come your way ..." He doesn't say if – because James doesn't deal in fantasy – he says "when" they come. And some Jesus followers just don't get it. They are thinking, "Life's too hard! So this Jesus stuff just isn't working!" Well, listen – James just puts it right up front. This is Christianity 101. In this broken world, you're going to hurt sometimes: "When ... trials come your way." Some of you are in the middle of one right now. So you need what comes next.

It's kind of a word we don't expect. The NLT calls them troubles; the NIV calls them trials. And that gets more to the heart of it. In the next verse James says, "When your faith is tested." These messes are trials, they are tests. He's trying to tell us that our troubles can either make us, or break us. And you've seen it happen. You've seen messes break people, and you've seen them make some people stronger. It all depends on how you deal with them. I have seen trouble drive some of you away from God; I've seen the same trouble drive some of you closer to God. Now James is going to make it crystal clear that God doesn't cause your messes – sin does that. But he's telling you that God will use your messes to make you tougher, if you let him.

Here's the deal: When hard times come, do you lean away from God, or do you lean in? The tough ones lean in. I'm telling you guys: the toughest Christians I have ever been around are the ones who have been through it. They are not the ones who haven't been tested; they are the ones who have been through the wars and have learned that God really is good, and smart, and powerful. ... They lean in, and they learn to trust him

You see, James says, "When your faith is tested (and it will be), your endurance (your perseverance, your toughness) has a chance to grow." (3) The Bible talks about this endurance a lot; it keeps telling us to stand firm! It's like a command to a soldier, "Hold your post." We weather the storm, we make it through, we don't give up, we don't quit.

To be perfectly honest, guys, the reason some of you are so immature, the reason your faith is so weak, is that you are a quitter. Boy that's hard, isn't it? It's almost rude. My preaching partner, Randy, says: "You show me immaturity and I'll show you a quitter." A relationship gets tough, and you quit. So you have another relationship and it gets tough (they always do!), and you quit again. You have a hard job, you quit. You go to church and you have issues with someone, maybe with the preacher, and you quit. Life gets hard, and God doesn't respond the way you think he should, and you quit ... him.

Listen to how James unpacks it. He says, "You know that when your faith is tested, your endurance (your perseverance, your toughness) has a chance to grow. So let it grow, (don't quit – let it grow!) for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (3-4) You buy that, don't you? I like these pics I found online.

- "Don't quit. You're already in pain. You're already hurt. Get a reward from it." That's kind of what James is saying.
- This one just says, "Don't Quit ... Do It." I like that. You?
- Or this one: "Winners are not people who never fail, but people who never quit." You buy that?
- Last one: "You are going to want to give up. Don't." Short and sweet – and it's what James is trying to tell us.

The Message puts it like this, it says: "You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to

get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.”

And that’s why, James says; that’s why, “When troubles of any kind come your way, (we can) consider it an opportunity for great joy.” (2) Really! Because we know the tough times can make us tougher. Because we know they can drive us closer to God. That just sounds weird, doesn’t it – consider your troubles, consider your messes an opportunity for joy? Until you think it through.

Now let me tell you what some people think he’s saying. They get it way wrong. It doesn’t mean that we are supposed to go looking for trouble so God can use it. It doesn’t mean we are supposed to be happy that we have a messed up kid, or our spouse had an affair, or we got a pink slip at work. It means we know our God is bigger than our messes. It means we know that God can use our messes to make us into something special.

The truth is, we misunderstand what this joy is all about. We get confused about what it really means. This joy James is talking about really isn’t about happiness at all. You see, happiness is something we feel when things are going well. I can have joy even when they are not. I’m happy when life is good. God offers me joy even when it is not. Happiness is a fickle emotion – it comes and goes so quickly. Joy is as much a state of mind as much as it is an emotion. In fact, it’s a choice I can make. It’s a choice you can make. He says, “Consider your messes an opportunity for joy.” “Consider them,” “think of them,” “Choose to use them” as an opportunity for joy. You see, joy comes out of my confidence in God. My joy is there because I know that no matter how big my problems are, he’s bigger. My joy is there because I know that no matter how tough things are now, what God is preparing me for is going to be way worth it. Joy comes out of our trust that no matter what is happening to us on the outside, God is still good, and God is still wise, and God is still supremely powerful – and we need to hang with him.

I like happiness, guys. You’re twisted if you don’t. I love it when things are just working out great. You find out you’re getting a raise – you’re happy. You find out your boss is quitting – you’re happy. Your wife gives you a back scratch – you’re really, really happy. You smell bacon – you’re ecstatic. But what happens when the doctor says, “You’d better sit down”?

What happens when your rival gets the promotion and the raise? What happens when your husband says, “I’ve found somebody else”? That’s where joy comes in, for a Jesus follower. That’s where we choose joy, because we know that even in the middle of the mess, he’s still there, and he’s still good, and he has an amazing future planned for us. You see, happiness comes and goes for everybody: Jesus follower or not. Joy ... that’s God’s gift to us, to those of us who choose to trust him. Joy is not because of our circumstances, it is in spite of them. And ... faith works!

We “consider it an opportunity for joy,” when troubles come our way, because we know when our faith is tested, we’ll get tougher, he’ll make us stronger ... if we let him. So let him grow you up in the middle of your messes, so that you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. Got it? Let’s keep going.

Now this is not easy; it’s not easy to choose joy. So here’s what he says next. He says, “If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you.” (5) If you need wisdom, ask for it! ... You see, this joy is a state of mind; this joy is a choice; it’s a way of looking through our mess at the one who is completely good, and totally wise, and infinitely powerful. So if you are having a hard time choosing joy, if you need wisdom, he says – ask God for it.

How many of you guys need some wisdom? ... Raise your hands, if you need some wisdom. Now, if your hand is not up, you need some wisdom. And that’s kind of what James is saying here. You see, there’s something about the way he writes this sentence in Greek you can’t see in the English. The words he uses mean something like this: “If any of you need wisdom – and you do, you really do – you need to ask God for it.”

Do you know what wisdom is? Do you know what it means? Wisdom isn’t about book smarts, or even street smarts. Wisdom isn’t about knowing more stuff than other people. It really isn’t about “information” at all. Have you ever seen really smart people do really stupid stuff? It’s epidemic, guys. Wisdom is about learning to trust God and live out what you believe. One great teacher puts it like this (Driscoll). He says, “Knowledge isn’t bad, it just isn’t enough. Knowledge is knowing the truth, wisdom is knowing what to do with it. Knowledge fills your mind; wisdom guides your life. Knowledge tells you what to believe; wisdom tells you how to behave.”

And we need some wisdom. You see, a lot of us Jesus followers know a lot, we just don't live it out. So we need to pray for wisdom – the wisdom to trust him, that his way is right; and the wisdom to do it. When life is hard – you need wisdom. When life is confusing, and his ways seem odd – you need wisdom. So James says, “Ask God for it.” There's no shame in asking the perfectly wise God for wisdom. In fact, we're kind of stupid not to.

Now, don't get confused about what you're asking for. God never promises to answer all our questions. That's not what wisdom is all about. And he doesn't promise to make all our tough decisions for us. That's not what asking for wisdom does for us. And he doesn't promise to give us a roadmap for our life. A lot of Christians think he will; but it's not what the Bible teaches. He promises to be there with you in the tough times. He promises to give you the ability to withstand temptation. He promises to make you stronger, if you let him. And he promises that there is something infinitely better on the other side... if you hang with him.

And James goes on. He says, “But when you ask him (for wisdom), be sure that your faith is in God alone.” (6) I like the way the NIV puts it a little better. It says, “But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt.”

Guys, James is telling us to trust him, to trust God. When you pray to God, do you trust him ... whatever answer he gives you? Do you trust that he is still good ... even when life is hard? Do you trust that he is completely wise ... even when his way is counterintuitive? Do you trust that he is infinitely powerful ... even when it seems like the world is winning? Do you trust God? Are you willing to trust him with your life? That's what James is talking about, guys. Because when we doubt his wisdom or his character, then our hard times can become really dangerous times, spiritually. If your messes cause you to lean away from God, then your trials will morph into temptations. And then you are in real trouble.

I'm going to skip down a few verses to verse 13. There is some really important stuff for us here that kind of wraps this up. Remember, James says (1) life is going to hard – even if you are a Jesus follower. But (2) we can consider it joy, because we know that God can use the hard times to

make us stronger. In fact the strongest Jesus followers you know are the ones who have been through some really hard times, and they came out still loving God on the other side... But sometimes the hard times don't make us stronger. Sometimes they tempt us to lean away from God, to doubt God. Sometimes our trials become temptations.

Verse 13, (This part is huge. He says,) Remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, (It's God's fault,) "God is tempting me." (Because) God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away." (12-14)

Do you remember how James told us to "consider our messes an opportunity for joy"? Do you remember how we said that joy is as much a choice we make, as it is an emotion? We can choose joy ... or not. Well, here's what happens when we don't. We start feeling sorry for ourselves, and we start looking for someone to blame. "My kid's a mess, my husband's a mess, my job's a mess ... whatever. Well ... I'm not sure you're really there, God. I'm not sure you really care. I'm not sure you are really good. I'm not sure you're all that smart. In fact, I kind of think my mess is your fault." And trouble becomes temptation. Trials and tests, which could have led to perseverance and maturity, become temptations instead, which will lead to at least sin, and maybe death – spiritual death.

Listen guys, James lays it out as clearly as he can: Your mess is not from God. God is not punishing you. He's not trying to knock you down. He's not testing you by tempting you to sin. "Don't ever say, 'God is tempting me,'" James says. "God himself is never tempted to do wrong – ever; and he never, ever tempts anyone else." The temptation is coming from inside you. You are letting your emotions, you are letting your desires entice you and lead you away from God ... instead of choosing joy.

So, bottom line: Life's hard, Jesus follower or not. Trouble is coming. When it comes, you'll have another opportunity to lean in towards God, or to lean away. When it comes, you'll have an opportunity to choose joy, or to get grumpy. You'll have an opportunity to trust him, or to blame him. If you choose to trust him, you'll discover joy, and God will make you tougher. Because faith works. If it's hard for you to choose joy, ask him for wisdom, ask him for help. If you don't you might find that you messes

may break you, rather than make you. Wow! That's a lot, isn't it? You can boil it down to this, when life gets hard, choose joy, because faith works.

This is so big. Some of us are really slow learners. About 21 years ago I was fired from the college, and you offered me a job. I didn't want this job, but I didn't have any better options at the time. I was a grumpy man for several years. Some of you guys think I still am. I was annoyed at God, because I didn't want to be a preacher. It's more fun to be a professor, than a preacher – at least for me. I was convicted by God about my grumpiness. He whispered to me, "The apostle Paul had to learn to be content. You do too. Knock it off, and learn to be content." And because he is God, and I'm not ... I said, "Yes Sir!"

It wasn't easy, but I did ... learn to be content. Kind of surprised me. It's not easy for me to be content. And then God kind of pushed on me again. He said, "We're not done yet. Now you need to learn to choose joy." You think contentment is hard? Joy is way harder. And it's a choice. I can choose joy, or not. You guys can choose joy, or not. You grumpy guys can choose joy, or not.

And we can push back and say, "But life's hard, and people are mean, and my dreams aren't coming true." And he whispers, "I know. But consider it joy. Because faith works."