

A Study of the Book of James

Sermon # 1

“Bad Things Happen To Everybody”

James 1:1-10

“I heard a story of a man who was riding on a subway. It was quite crowded and he had to face the door. He was prone to motion sickness and he began to get quite sick. The train raced into the station, the door opened, and the man became violently ill. The doors closed and the train sped on into the night. There happened to be a man standing on the platform waiting to get on the train at this particular door. In utter dismay he turned to the man behind him in line and said, *“Why me?”* I think that is often the way we feel. *“Why me, Lord?”* But we shouldn't be surprised. Suffering is no accident. It is the normal experience of every believer.” [David Roper. *“Suffering Successfully.”* Sermon on James 1:1-8. www.pbc.org/dp/roper/0471]

By way of introduction let me just say that the book of James is not a book of deep doctrine. It is not a defense of Christianity, nor an explanation of how to be saved. It is a letter written to individuals who are assumed to know the basics of the faith, and its intention is to drive home the importance of living out the truth. The main issue that prompted James to write is still a current concern, *“If you say you believe, why do live as if you don't?”* James makes a strong demand for transformed living in daily conduct.

James begins his letter in verse one by identifying himself merely as “James, a bond servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” James, the half-brother of Jesus, is the author of the book of James. James was one of four sons, born to Joseph and Mary. If they are listed in birth order in Matt 13:54-56, he is the oldest and thus the closest in age to Jesus. As any one with brothers and sisters will acknowledge comparison is evitable. Most have heard the statement, *“Why can't you be like your brother/sister?”* How do you think it must have felt to literally have a perfect brother? I wonder if James did not hear, *“James why can't you be more like Jesus?”* Perhaps that makes it easier for us to understand that none of Jesus' brothers or sisters believed in Him as the Messiah, including James, until after the resurrection.

Not only did James come to faith, he went on to be considered an Apostle (1 Cor. 15:7) and to become the pastor of the church at Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19). He was a man noted for his deep faith and his profound life of prayer.

James is writing to a group of primarily Jewish believers who are undergoing severe hardship. They were hated and despised. The Gentiles hated them because they were Jews and the Jews hated them because they were Christians. But rather than consoling them he challenges them. He challenges them to rethink their difficulties. And he challenges them to trust God in the midst of their difficulties.

The modern notion that becoming a Christian will make your life easier would be a totally foreign concept to James. James would have laughed at the idea that becoming a Christian will make all your problems disappear, and that you will “live happily ever-after.” In fact, James is saying that it is our

response to trials that prove the reality of our faith. Someone has said, “*Christian’s are like teabags, you don’t know what is in them until you put them in hot water.*”

We face the same challenge as the believer’s to whom he wrote this letter, that of dealing with difficulties in our lives. We often ask the question, “*How can I avoid these trials?*” The real question should be, “*How can I change the way I respond to hard times?*” The truth is that we cannot avoid trials. What we can do is change the way we react to difficulties in our lives. This morning I would like to share some simple principles that can change the way we deal with the difficulties that come rushing into our lives.

First, *It Helps to Realize That Difficulties Come Into Everyone’s Life.* (v. 2)

“My brethren, ??count it all joy ??when you fall into various trials”

I want you to circle the word “when” in this verse. James is telling us that trials are not optional they are inevitable. James does not say “if” you encounter trials but “when” you encounter trials. Peter also speaks of the inevitability of trials, “Beloved, do not be astonished at the fiery trial which is to try you, as *though* a strange thing happened to you,” (1 Peter 4:12 MKJV).

But as Oswald Chambers wrote, “To choose suffering makes no sense at all; to choose God’s will in the midst of our suffering makes all the sense in the world.” [As quoted by David Roper. *Growing Slowly Wise; Building A Faith That Works.* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2000) p. 27]

Yet James says, “My brothers, count *it* all joy when you fall into different kinds of (trials),” the word translated different or various (*poikilos*) is many colored or variegated, varied. This is not to emphasize the number but the diversity of trouble. It is not the idea that we are going to have many troubles, although that is true, it is the idea that we are going to have all kinds of them, varied kinds. These troubles may be the loss of a job, a broken relationship, difficulties at work, the untimely death of a family member, a lingering illness, depression that will not go away, a wayward child, unfaithful spouse or an abusive parent, but whatever they are they make us feel overwhelmed!

Now James says, in effect, if you are really a Christian it will be revealed by how you respond to trials. If your faith is no good in times of trouble, then it is just no good. If it is only good for when you don’t need it, then you don’t need it. If your faith in God is only good for when we are doing well, then what good is your faith? True faith is to sustain us when everything goes wrong. The genuineness of our faith is tested by how it stands up in times of trouble.

Realizing that *Difficulties Come Into Every Ones Life can help and...*

Secondly, *It Helps to Realize It Is Attitude That Determines Outcome.* (v. 2)

When you experienced times of trial in your life you may have asked, “Why?” “*Why am I experiencing these troubles?*” or “What purpose could this possibly serve?” I have. Have you ever really looked for the answer? Or did you just throw your arms up in disgust, blame God, and turn bitter. Think back to a recent trial, big or small, with which you had to deal. How did you feel about it? How did you react to it? What kind of thoughts went through your head? What was your attitude? Anger? Frustration? Disappointment? Failure?

Look again at verse two but this time I want you to circle the word “count.” “My brothers, count it all joy when you fall into different kinds of (trials) temptations.”

The word “count” is an accounting term meaning “to evaluate or to add up.” Here James is dealing with the attitude that we need have if we are to benefit from our trials. To consider it all joy in the midst of our trials is to respond with a deliberate, intelligent appraisal of our situation. James does not say that trials are a joy to go through, but that believers should count them as joy. He did not say that Christians should be joyous about their trials, but joyous in their trials.

Believers are not called to passively endure a time of testing, but are to learn from the experience. Philip Yancey in his book, “Where is God When It Hurts?” puts it this way; “... ‘Rejoicing in suffering’ does not mean Christians should act happy about tragedy and pain when they feel like crying. Such a view distorts honesty and true expression of feelings. Christianity is not phony. The Bible’s spotlight is on the end result, the use God can make of suffering in our lives. Before, He can produce that result, however, He first needs our commitment of trust in Him and the process of giving Him that commitment can be described as rejoicing.” [Philip Yancey. “Where is God when it hurts.” pp. 87-88]

It Is Attitude That Determines Outcome and...

Third, *It Helps to Realize We Can Be Certain God Has A Purpose* (vv. 3-4)

“knowing that the testing of your faith produces ??patience. (4?) But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be ??perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

Knowing that trials have a purpose can make a big difference in how you face the hard time that you are going through. God has not abandoned us, no matter how we may “feel.” Peter also reflects on the purpose of suffering when he says in 1 Peter 1:6-9, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now ??for a little while, if need be, ??you have been ??grieved by various trials, (?7)? that ??the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though ?it is tested by fire, ?may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, (?8) ?whom having not ??seen you love. ??Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, (?9)? receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.”

According to James enduring these tests produces certain characteristics in people being tested. First, they become “perfect” also translated “mature” (*telios*) not sinless, but spiritually mature and seasoned in their Christian experience. Second, they become “entire” meaning *whole and complete*, fully developed in their Christian experience. Third, they are “lacking in nothing” meaning that God will provide everything they need to remain obedient in their lives of faith.

A Christian is not a Christian unless his faith is tested and proved. And yet, we try to avoid being tested. We don’t like it when we are tested, not even in school. Testing is a completely negative idea in our heads. But, James says, “NOT FOR THE CHRISTIAN” it isn’t.

James is not *suggesting* that we consider trials a joy, he is *commanding*. The NIV translates the word (*hegesasthe*) as “consider.” That is actually a little weak and doesn’t really get at the force of the word. I “consider” what flavor of ice cream I want, or I “consider” which shirt I am going to wear. There really isn’t a whole lot of thought that goes into it. The KJV and other versions use the word “count.”

That is a little closer, but still, what does it mean to "count" something as joyful? James isn't just commanding us to take this idea lightly, but rather he is charging us to allow this way of thinking to completely rule or control our minds and our actions. Trials=joy must transform our minds and control our perception of everything we face. It does for the true Christian.

It is a command, and not just a meaningless command, but rather a command that is possible for us to obey. Let me explain. If I said, "*Raise your hand into the air.*" That is something that you can actually do. You can will your hand to rise up into the air. However, if I said, "*Jump up and touch the moon.*" That is something you cannot do. That is a command you are not capable of following. The command here in James, is one that IS possible. But this is an action one must do for himself. We have to make the effort on our own, no one else can do it for us. It has to be a conscious decision we make in our mind. It is not a suggestion, but rather a command that demands a response.

The word "trial" here is deeper than a first glance may convey. The word carries with it not only outward trials, like the loss of a job, or the death of a family member, but also inward trials. Problems may all start out on the outside but sooner or later end up on the inside and that is what makes them a trial.

We Can Be Certain God Has A Purpose and...

Fourth, *It Helps to Realize We Were Not Intended to Go Through Trials Alone* (vv. 5-8)

Christians do not go through their trials alone. They have God's wisdom at their disposal. Verse five says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

This wisdom is not philosophical insight about how to handle Life, but spiritual wisdom divinely provided through God's Word and prayer. Such wisdom is not given automatically. Believers must "ask of God" that is pray for God to provide divine insights on how to handle the testing. God does not promise that the wisdom given will cause the outcome of the trial to conform to a believer's will, but it will accomplish His purpose in the one being tested.

Wisdom is applied knowledge; it is knowledge put to use. Many of us *know* the principle that is spelled out in verses 2, 3 and 4. We know that suffering comes to perfect us. But how do we put that knowledge into practice in a specific situation of testing? What do we do? Do we stay where we are, or do we move elsewhere, do we look for release or do we expect God to fulfill us where we are? What do we do? James says, in a situation like that, ask God! He will let you know what to do. He will let you know how to react in the particular situation. You can "count" on Him.

We Were Not Intended to Go Through Trials Alone and....

Fifth, *It Helps to Realize God Intents Trials As A Blessing* (v. 12)

"Blessed is the man who endures (trials) temptation, because having been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Malcolm Muggeridge once said, "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfactions. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not happiness. In other words, if it were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence.... the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too dull (banal) and trivial to be endurable." [Malcolm Muggeridge. A 20th Century Testimony. As quoted by Charles Swindoll. The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1501 Other Stories. (Nashville: Word, 1998) p. 582]

James ends this section on Trials by saying in verse twelve, "Blessed is the man that endures trials." This is a beatitude, by the way, very much in the same vein as Matthew 5 where Jesus gave the beatitudes. But he says, "Blessed is the man that endures trials, for when (or literally...after his trial is over) he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Here is a declaration of the blessedness of one who passes the test. "Blessed" means happy. Better yet, it means satisfied. Better yet, it means fulfilled with inner joy. In fact, in chapter 5 of James and verse 11, he says the same thing, "Behold, we count them happy who endure."

Now this is not happiness due to freedom from trial, this is happiness due to victory over trial. That is a Big difference. It's not the ordinary happiness of someone who never knew conflict, it's the exhilaration of one who fought and won. It's not the happiness of the spectator, it's the happiness of the participant. Happy, satisfied, fulfilled with an inner state of joy is the man who endures testing.

Now the point is simple. The person who claims to be a Christian and who goes through trials and comes out a winner which means he never gives up his faith, he never abandons God, he is shown to be the genuine Christian. And he will receive the crown of life which the Lord will give to those that love Him.

There are people who come, and you see them and I see them, they come to the church, they profess Christ, they get baptized. Trouble comes into their life and they're gone. I mean, they're gone. And they may never come back. But whatever struggle they had to go through, it just was overpowering and they walked away and maybe shook a fist at God and that was it. You see, perseverance through trial is the proof of a living faith.

We all experience trials, but God has something great in mind, and James is calling us to see it. Here is how a Christian will look at the events of his life. Here is what God's plan is for you.

Let me close by sharing with you a thought from Charles Spurgeon (the great preacher and theologian of the 1800's). *"I have always looked back to times of trial with a kind of longing, not to have them return, but to feel the strength of God as I felt it then, to feel the power of faith as I felt it then, to hang on to God's powerful arm as I hung on to it then, and see God at work as I saw him then."*

Let that be your attitude as you count it all joy!!!!

Prayer

“Lord, when all kinds of trials come reeling into our lives, help us not to question your love. Help us to remember that You are too good to be unkind and too wise to make a mistake. Keep us from confusion, O Lord, for the honor of your name. Amen”