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James 1:1-4

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Joy: God's Medicine for the Afflicted Soul

James 1:1-4

“At the heart of why people disbelieve *and* believe in God, of why people decline *and* grow in character, of how God becomes less real *and* more real to us – is suffering”

(Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 6)

You may not have given this much thought, but in two years (2017) the world will celebrate (although some will bemoan!) the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation. As I'm sure you do know, it was on October 31, 1517, that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany. The rest, so they say, is history.

Martin Luther is to be greatly admired for many things, but he also had his fair share of sinful ways. He was a deep theological thinker to whom we are all in many ways indebted. But he also said some genuinely stupid things, one of which concerned the Epistle of James that we today will begin to study.

Luther loved John's gospel and especially the epistles of Paul the Apostle. They are all books, said Luther, that “show us Christ” and teach “everything that is needful and blessed” for us to know. The Epistle of James, on the other hand, said Luther, is “*an epistle of straw* in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it. Therefore, I will not have it in my Bible in the number of the proper chief books, but do not intend thereby to forbid anyone to place and exalt it as he pleases, for there is many a good saying in it” (Introduction to the first edition of the German NT, September 1522).

I'm certainly not here to defend Luther. I think he was profoundly wrong. But I can understand, to some extent, why he objected to the book of James. Apart from James 1:1 and 2:1 there is no explicit reference to Jesus Christ. There is nothing explicitly in the book about the earthly life of Jesus, the cross, or the resurrection. The Holy Spirit is only mentioned once in chapter four.

There is nothing in James about the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, nothing about the kingdom of God or the church, and worst of all, to some it appears that in chapter two he teaches that we are justified or saved by works! Perhaps, then, we ought to cut old Luther a little slack!

But should we likewise be disturbed by what James doesn't say? No. Not at all, once we understand the focus and theme of this letter. The book as a whole is concerned with Christian conduct. That's not to say that there is no theology or doctrine in the book. It's simply to say that James is concerned that what we believe demonstrate itself in how we live. James is largely about one truth: that ***genuine, saving, justifying faith in Jesus Christ is alive and vibrant and displays itself in obedience and love and good works.***

James's purpose, then, is ethical, not theological. He is writing to professing Christian people who have become blind to the discrepancy between what they profess to believe and how they behave. His purpose in the book is to exhort and encourage believers to live consistently with their confession, to practice what they preach! [There are no fewer than 55 imperatives or exhortations in the book, the highest occurrence per verse of any NT book!]

Who Wrote the Book, to Whom, and When?

The author identifies himself in v. 1 as "James." Some prefer to translate this "Jacob" and that's perfectly ok, insofar as "James" is the anglicized rendering of the Greek name "Jacob".

There are no fewer than six prominent men in the NT named James, but only three of them could possibly qualify as the author of this letter.

(1) James, the son of Zebedee, brother of John and one of the 12 apostles (see Acts 12:1-2). This is the James who was martyred when King Herod Agrippa had him beheaded in 44 a.d. But it's fairly clear that the book could not have been written before 44, so this James is precluded.

(2) James, the son of Alphaeus, another of the original 12 apostles (see Mark 3:18; Matt. 10:3; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

(3) The most likely candidate is James, *the half-brother of Jesus* (see Mark 6:3-6). He was the natural born son of Joseph and Mary and was, like the rest of his family (except for Mary) initially opposed to the ministry of Jesus. At one point he attempted to restrain Jesus from pursuing his earthly ministry. After the resurrection, we find James in Jerusalem, now a committed and loyal disciple of his half-brother. For more on him in the NT, see Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18.

I should mention one more thing about James. According to the historian Eusebius, James was famous for his devotion to prayer. In one ancient document (Hegesippus, 160 a.d.) it was said of him that he would enter the Temple alone,

“and be found prostrate on his knees beseeching pardon for the people, so that his knees were callous like a camel’s in consequence of his continually kneeling in prayer to God and beseeching pardon for the people. Because of his exceeding righteousness he was called the ‘Just’” (H.e., ii.23).

People today desire to be known for any number of physical characteristics: a new suit, a nose job, a different hair style, muscles, a flat belly, etc. James would have been singled out for one thing: calloused knees! Now that’s something to be remembered for!

And we mustn’t overlook his self-designation: “servant” of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was the half-brother of Jesus, he says nothing to that effect. This might strike you and me as the perfect opportunity to name drop! Our tendency would be to leverage our physical relationship with Jesus to gain stature and respect and authority in the Christian world. But not James. What is of greater importance than blood relations is his spiritual status as a servant, a slave of the one who is his Lord and God.

The letter was written to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” Whereas some believe this is a reference to the totality of God’s people, both Gentile and Jewish, it is more likely that these were Jewish Christians who had been scattered through the ancient world following the persecution that is mentioned in Acts 8:1 when believers fled Jerusalem in all directions.

One more thing to keep in mind: most scholars believe that James was the very first NT letter, probably written in the mid to late 40’s of the first century.

Suffering: The Greatest Threat to our Confidence in the Goodness of God

When you stand in breathless amazement at the beauty of the star-lit night, do you question the goodness of God? No. When you witness the birth of your child and contemplate the wonder and majesty of how he/she is crafted and shaped, do you immediately doubt whether God has your best interests at heart? No. When you discover that your bank account is full and ever-increasing and that your insurance company has sent you a check that will enable you to buy a new car, even better than the one you just totaled in an accident, do you raise an angry fist and shout ugly slurs at God? No. When your spouse tells you repeatedly how much they love you and your boss compliments your efforts in the office, do you grow resentful and give serious consideration to abandoning the local church and your Christian friends? Of course not!

But reverse each of those scenarios. Or simply think about the especially difficult circumstances you are currently confronting in life. Now, do you feel the temptation to wonder if God is good? Do you sense a strong pull in the direction of despair and anger and doubt? Sure. That is why ***suffering, in whatever form it comes our way, is the single greatest threat to our confidence in the goodness and trustworthiness of God.***

Although I don't want to get overly precise with these words lest by looking too closely at the trees we lose sight of the forest, we should observe a clear progression in what James says. The inescapable reality to which James directs our attention are "trials of various kinds" (v. 2b). And ***James wants us to think with him about the nature of our response to such trials (namely, joy), the basis of our response (namely, knowledge), and the goal of that response (namely, growth in Christian character). So keep in the forefront of your mind three words: joy, knowledge, growth.***

But before we jump into the deep end of the pool, let's look closely at that phrase, "when you meet trials of various kinds" (v. 2b). Several things virtually jump off the page at us.

For example, the word "***when***" or perhaps even "whenever" may not be a word that you wish to consider, for the simple fact that it means ***there will never come a time when we won't face trials and hardships***, at least not this side of the Second Coming of Christ! The word "when" points to the fact that trials and challenges and painful obstacles will be ***recurrent***. The obvious implication is that we likely will never reach a stage in our Christian experience when we will be free from trials or insulated against them. Sadly, some Christians today preach and believe in what I call ***triumphalism***, the idea that we can make such remarkable progress in our spiritual life and exercise such resilient faith that we are elevated above and beyond the reach of routine

difficulties. The end result of such an unbiblical view is disillusionment and anger, for the simple fact that no one who is honest about it, no matter how intensely and consistently they try to convince themselves otherwise, ever attains such a lofty level of life on this earth.

Another important word is the one translated “*meet*” or in some translations “encounter”. The verb points to the unexpected nature of trials. James is not suggesting that we seek out trials and hardship. If we are living faithfully, they will find us. Trials are never to be manufactured. Indeed, every conceivable means, short of moral compromise, ought to be employed to avoid them. Any sort of perverse ambition for suffering or martyrdom is alien to Scripture.

The word “*trials*” is one we come across often in Scripture and points primarily to *external obstacles*. He’s not talking about internal temptation to sin. He will, however, address that issue later in chapter one. Rather he has in mind obstacles, challenging circumstances, and the wide variety of things we experience that cause us to wonder if God is really good enough and big enough to warrant our trust.

In fact, that word rendered “*various kinds*” makes the point clearly. It indicates that trials and hardship and challenges to our faith come in a wide variety of forms. Some trials come our way simply because we are human and we live in a world with other fallen humans. There isn’t much you can do when you are flat broke and the truck in front of you on Broadway Extension sends a rock into your windshield, shattering it and thrusting you into even deeper financial troubles. Other trials are thrown in our path precisely because we are Christians (see 1 Peter 4:12). James would include here verbal abuse, ridicule, loss of business opportunities, loss of a job, and the typical daily pressures we face trying to live a godly life in an ungodly world.

These trials are without question the greatest threat to our confidence in the goodness of God. As James says, they “test” our faith more than anything else we experience. They cause us to question whether he really has our best interests at heart. Some trials are so severe and prolonged that we begin to doubt whether God even exists, or if he does exist if he knows who we are and what we are experiencing. Is he simply indifferent to our pain? Does he actually hear my prayers or even care about what I need? How could he possibly allow one of his blood-bought, redeemed sons or daughters to endure such anguish when he could quite easily eliminate it or lift the burden? It’s the age-old question: ***Where is God when life hurts? What is he doing, if anything, to make things better, or at least more tolerable?***

James’ solution isn’t to promise us immediate and permanent deliverance from trials. He doesn’t say something like: “Look folks, be patient. God will eventually remove all barriers and

eliminate all struggles and relieve you of all pain and vanquish every enemy.” Nor does he say, “God had nothing to do with these trials. They are all of the Devil. But he’s been busy with other, more important matters and will ultimately get around to you and bring you complete and final relief.”

Nor does he say, “All these hardships you face are fundamentally meaningless and useless and have no purpose but to irritate, agitate, and upset your life. There *is no point* to your pain. So deal with it.” One more thing. James doesn’t tell us that if we will just read more and pray more and study the Bible more and be more faithful in attendance at church that eventually we will make sense of all our trials and suffering. The fact is, there are experiences we face that we will never, in this life, understand. They will always baffle us and befuddle us and resist being reduced to easy answers.

Joy: the nature of our response to trials (v. 2)

So again, what are the three words that reveal the key to James’ point? ***Joy, Knowledge, Growth.*** Let’s look first at joy, or the nature of our response to trials.

First, when he speaks of “*all*” joy we should probably understand this as ***utter*** joy, ***great*** joy, ***pure*** joy. I don’t think he means that every other emotional response is out of bounds, as if we should never feel grief or heartache. Rather he means that joy should be triumphant over all else that we might experience.

Second, ***this perspective runs counter to everything we know about ourselves.*** The default setting of the human soul is the desire for peace, prosperity, ease, unbroken and unchallenged success. James’ advice is a complete reversal of everything we regard as normal.

Third, ***he is not saying that joy is the same thing as pleasure.*** He is not advocating some version of spiritual masochism. To find pleasure in pain is sick. As we’ll see, joy comes from looking through and beyond the trials and suffering to the opportunity they provide for us to be more greatly refined and conformed to the character of Christ.

Fourth, note that ***“joy” is to characterize us at the inception or beginning of trials, not merely at their end.*** It’s when we “meet” or “encounter” them, not merely after they have passed. To rejoice when the trial has concluded is easy. That doesn’t take any special strength or resolve.

Anyone can be joyful when suffering ceases. But James bids us rejoice at their onset. If you want to end trials with joy, begin trials with joy. Don't pretend or play make-believe. Simply look at trials from God's perspective and embrace his purpose for you in them.

Fifth, the verb translated "**count**" or "**consider**" or "**reckon**" is important. It reminds us of at least two things. **(1) Our response to the painful and distressing challenges of life is one that begins in the mind, not the emotions.** Often our immediate reaction is at what we might call the "gut" level: we experience emotional disgust or anger or frustration; we recoil; we rebel, and sometimes we yield to bitterness. James has a solution for this: engage your mind and think; put yourself in a frame of mind or spiritual perspective where you see in trials and hardship their divine purpose. We'll see this even more clearly in v. 3.

(2) James at no time suggests that trials are joyful. Rather we are to reckon or consider or count them as opportunities for joy because they provide us the occasion for advancement in Christian maturity. Pain and distress are in and of themselves just as uncomfortable and agonizing for the Christian as they are for the non-Christian. But they are more readily and easily endured by the believer because we see in them the loving hand of our heavenly Father who is using them to make us look more like Jesus.

Grief, sorrow, deprivation, financial pressure, and physical agony are real and no amount of Christian faith will reduce their bite. **The only thing that will make them tolerable is your confident belief that there is something of greater value than personal peace and pleasure.** If physical death terminates human existence, what James is telling you to do is stupid. If the meaning of life is wholly defined by our earthly calendar, then to count trials and suffering as occasions for joy is insane. His counsel only makes sense in the light of an eternal afterlife in which the grief of this world is transformed into the glory of the next (see 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Knowledge: the basis of our response to trials (v. 3)

The key to what James has in mind is **knowledge**. Not barren, abstract ideas in the head, but a perspective on life that is shaped and fashioned by **looking at things from God's point of view**. Paul said much the same thing in Romans 5:3-4 –

"Not only that, but **we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing** that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Outlook determines outcome! For as long as you have any doubts that trials and afflictions are divinely orchestrated, you will never persevere through them and experience the change that God intends them to produce. ***Knowledge of God's sovereign and providential control of all things, both good and bad, is the foundation on which victory over despair is built.***

Trials have a unique way of “***testing***” our faith. They do it by exposing to us all that is fake and superficial in our relationship with God. If we only love God when he makes life easy, we don't truly know him or value him or treasure him above all else. Trials force us to ask ourselves a tough question: ***Is the glory and beauty and value of God more important to me than earthly comfort and prosperity?*** See 1 Peter 1:6-7.

The end product of this testing is something James refers to as “***steadfastness***” and Paul describes as “***endurance***.” But it's the same Greek word in both passages. The reason they both focus on endurance or perseverance or bearing up under the burdens of life is because ***the first thing that suffering tempts us to do is quit!*** That's the easiest way out. Just give up. Go in another direction. Use whatever drug or diversion or idol or sin that will eliminate the hardship and supply you with pleasure and ease and peace.

The meaning of “steadfastness” or “endurance” isn't passive acquiescence. This is not mere patience or submission. ***It is active endurance, the constant and solemn resolve to weather the storm of trial without wavering in our faith that God is really good and worthy of our trust.***

I can almost hear someone say: “But of all that God asks of me, endurance is the one thing I can't give him.” Of course you can't. That's because you don't understand that we don't give God perseverance. God gives it to us! Listen to how Paul describes God in Romans 15:4-6 –

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance [i.e., steadfastness] and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May ***the God of endurance*** and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We do not produce perseverance in our souls. We have no power to supply ourselves with steadfastness. God does it. And he does it by reminding us daily and hourly and minute-by-minute of the truth of all that he is for us in Jesus, as revealed in Scripture. Those reminders,

those truths, those glorious realities that God has revealed to us are the raw material which the Spirit takes and imparts endurance and steadfastness in our hearts.

But couldn't God have chosen some other means or method to help us grow up in Christ? Why trials and afflictions and hardships?

First, suffering drives us into the arms of a gracious and merciful God. "Suffering," notes Tim Keller, "dispels the illusion that we have the strength and competence to rule our own lives and save ourselves" (49). Suffering awakens us to our weakness and God's all-sufficient strength.

Second, God orchestrates our suffering to test the sincerity of our faith, to bring to the surface what is real and authentic in our relationship with God and to expose all that is superficial and fake. *Afflictions weed out hypocrisy*. Faith that only flourishes in times of personal peace and prosperity only to wither during bad weather is a false faith.

Third, we suffer for the benefit of others. When we bear up under burdens we show them that Christ is worthy of our trust and adoration even when all is not going as we might prefer. To endure hardship with joy demonstrates that Christ is enough for us: we don't need money and health and worldly happiness to find satisfaction and joy. And all of this provides a platform on which the glory and sufficiency and all-satisfying majesty of God is played out in our lives.

Growth: the goal of our response to trials (v. 4)

We've now come to the third of our three words. The first is joy, the second is knowledge, and the third is growth.

How do we grow up in Christ? What are the ways in which our selfish and idolatrous hearts are changed so that we are more concerned about Christ and others than we are for ourselves? Is there a key to experiencing deep-seated, heart-level transformation so that how I think and feel and speak and respond to people looks more and more like how Jesus would think and feel and speak and respond?

Yes! But it doesn't happen at a singular point in time. There's nothing instantaneous about it. This sort of alteration in our souls is slow and progressive and incremental. Notice how James

puts it in the opening half of v. 4 – “and let steadfastness have its full effect . . .” In other words, don’t impede the process. Don’t put a halt to what God is doing in your life simply because you are impatient or the pain becomes intolerable. Let this work of God in you have time to ripen and grow and reap the moral harvest that God has in store for you.

As important as endurance or perseverance most assuredly is, it’s not the end game here. Rather, James calls on us to make room for the on-going work of endurance in our hearts; that is to say, let it produce the harvest that God designed, namely, ***the development of a more mature and complete Christian character***. And don’t overlook the fact that merely suffering trials and difficulties accomplishes nothing in itself. There must be the proper response in our hearts. Hardship for hardship’s sake is worthless. But hardship for the sake of greater growth and love for God is the aim.

Conclusion

According to Tim Keller, “At the heart of why people disbelieve *and* believe in God, of why people decline *and* grow in character, of how God becomes less real *and* more real to us – is suffering” (*Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 6). I couldn’t agree more. Keller’s point is simply that how you understand, process, and respond to suffering will have perhaps the greatest impact of anything in life on whether or not you trust God, whether or not you grow in your relationship with Christ or regress, and whether or not you find him to be real and close and loving and worthy of your confidence.

So what is it that we must know and believe about both God and suffering that will refine our faith and deepen our confidence in his goodness and enable us to encounter our trials with genuine joy? I think the answer is two-fold.

First, you must believe that God is sovereignly in charge of all things, that every event in your life, whether it brings pleasure or pain, is either providentially permitted or directly orchestrated by your heavenly Father for your ultimate spiritual good and your conformity to the image of Christ. If God’s sovereignty is a hard pill for you to swallow, it will never penetrate into your spiritual bloodstream and bring medicine to heal the hurt in your soul.

Second, you must believe that there is something more important than ease, opulence, comfort, and convenience. In other words, if you place a higher value on physical, social, and financial prosperity than you do on the development of your moral character, what James says is useless to

you. Why should you ever count as joy an experience that deprives you of physical, social, and financial prosperity unless you believe that God is working in and through that hardship to shape and fashion your heart and soul to look more and more like Jesus?