

Faith that Works: Enjoying Trials

James 1:2-18

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~Embrace the trials and temptations you will face as the path to an abundantly good Father~

Please open your Bibles to James chapter 1. You will find the book of James almost at the end of the Bible, after Hebrews and a bit before Revelation. There is a Bible in the pew in front of you. And as you find James would you pray?

[Pray]

If you were with us last week you know that we have just begun a new series called “Faith that Works.” This is a series about what it looks like to put our faith in Christ into action. In other words James wants to take us past talking about following Jesus, and bring us to the spot where we are actually following Jesus – and he says these are not the same thing.

Now James, as we said last week, was the step-brother of Jesus. And he was a man that went from doubting Jesus – thinking He was delusional – to believing He was God. And then James became the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

Now that’s a pretty big leap for a step-brother to take. So what brought this transformation about? What caused Jesus’ little brother to stop doubting and believe? Well, it was the resurrection. This is what you have to do if you want to convince your step-brother that you are God. You have to be mocked and beaten and stripped and whipped and crowned in thorns and crucified... to death. And then be buried for three days. And after all that you need to come back to life and eat fish with your friends and take a 12 kilometer walk to Emmaus in the afternoon. That will do it. That’s what did it for James.

And James became so sure of who Jesus was that he refused to recant when the Jews dragged him to the roof of the temple. And so they threw him off and pummeled him to death – and all the while he wouldn’t stop saying my step-broth was God in the flesh.

Not long before that James wrote this letter to the people of his church who had been scattered by persecution and had fled for their lives all across Asia.

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Now we are going to pick up the text today in chapter 1 verse 2. And in this passage James urges us to change our perspective on difficulty.

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Now I wonder if there is anyone here who would say: “I sure wish things were harder in my life. I’m tired of being so healthy and rich and successful and comfortable. I just wish something bad would happen.” Any hands?

I don't know anyone who would say that. And that isn't what James is calling us to. But you almost might think that given the words he chooses to put right at the beginning of his letter. So if we sum this section up in a sentence – verses 2 to 18 – in it James says: **Embrace the trials and temptations you will face as the path to the abundance of a good Father.**

So look with me at verse 2.

[Read James 1:2-4]

There is a group of Christians who believe that the Bible promises that if you come to Christ you will escape the miseries that many others within the world face. So Jesus is the way to get health and happiness and riches. And we call this kind of teaching the “health and wealth gospel.”

But the problem with this kind of teaching is that it continually has to skip over verses in the Bible that teach exactly the opposite thing. And this is one of those verses. This is a verse that says if you give yourself to Jesus you will not find yourself living in utopia here on earth. That's not what it's about.

So James is talking to Christians and he says “When you face trials” – not “if you face trials” – but “when.” This is going to happen. Trials aren't something that a few unlucky people get. Trials are things that all people get. It isn't a matter of if, it is a matter of when.

And James says “Whenever you face trials of many kinds.” So this is an all inclusive statement. James isn't just talking about persecution – which only happens to some people some of the time – though he would certainly include that here. But he is talking about any kind of trial whatsoever.

So if you are sick, that fits in here – that's one kind of many trials. And if you've lost a family member – that's one of many trials. And if you have a bad boss who is disrespecting you at work – that's one of many trials. Or if your job is overwhelming and you aren't sure you can hack it – that's one of many trials. And if you have a husband or wife who isn't meeting your needs and leaves you feeling alone – that's one of many trials. And we could go on and on.

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So let's do another survey. Can I just see a show of hands for a second? Does anyone here have any aspect of your life that is less than perfect?... Lots! The rest of you belong in a Martha Stewart magazine not here at church. But if you have any difficulty in your life James is speaking into you situation.

And James says when you find yourself in one of these times – and if you aren't there right now sooner or later you will be – then you will find yourself in a spot where your perspective probably needs to change.

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Now this is a tough sell. I'm going to let you in on one of my guilty pleasures. When I'm in a tough spot – which seems to happen more often than I enjoy – one of my favorite thing to do is complain about it. Now I usually complain to my wife, but if she isn't around I'll complain to anyone who will listen, and my hope is that they will rub my feet and say “poor you, I can't believe how bad you have it.”

Now every now and then I can convince my wife to do this – and those are good days – but I've had a lot less success with anyone else. Anyone willing to be a resource for me the next time I go through something tough?

But as terrible as I am I suspect I'm not alone in this... Isn't this what we do when trials come our way? Don't we view them as unfair and the enemy of our happiness? Don't we complain? Or don't we do everything we can to make the difficult times go away? Don't we love to numb pain?

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James says this isn't the way to live. Now we don't have the choice not to experience trials – they are inevitable – but we don't have to be defeated by them. They can't be fought off so don't make that your life mission – “I'm just trying to increase my comfort.” Instead James calls us to something totally counter-cultural. He says “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” How's that for out there?

This means look at the difficulty you are facing with your child or your spouse or your boss or your health or whatever it is. Look at that difficulty and don't just have a good attitude about it, but instead say “thank you Jesus for this – this is the best thing that could happen to me right now.”

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Seriously?! We are supposed to be happy about bad things? Seriously?! How are we supposed to do that? Look at verse 3.

James says every difficulty we face is a test of our faith – every one. So when you stub your toe first thing in the morning, or when your wife of 59 years passes away, both of these situations are tests of your faith. Will you still acknowledge God as good in that moment, or do you go somewhere else? What do you do when suffering hits?

James says for Christ followers every encounter with difficulty we face is the opportunity to grow in maturity.

So when you were younger in your faith you used to swear a blue streak every time you hit your thumb with a hammer, but you aren't there anymore. Now you still hit your thumb from time to time, but your first impulse isn't to kick the dog. You are maturing. And maturity always comes this way. Maturity comes as we experience difficulty and learn to rise above because of it.

Or to take a farming illustration: it's been said "Nature's wonders follow the plow." So at first the field is full of weeds and nothing good is growing there, and then comes the deep cut of the plow that turns the soil over. And only after that does the crop grow.

And James says this is better. Maturity is better. Nothing is worse than an old person who never matured. If you are 30 and still living in your mom's basement playing video games that's a problem. And if you're 50 or 60 or 70 and still haven't learned to live a life that isn't all about you it's a tragedy. Maturity is beautiful. So James says let it happen – let testing mature you.

Now this is easy to talk about, but hard to actually do. I mean when you are in the middle of a character building situation it's hard to see it as something that could bring you to God – it just feels hard and confusing.

James goes on, look at verse 5.

[Read James 1:5-8]

James gives us two prayers to pray in the midst of the many trials we face. First there is the prayer "give me wisdom." And the second is the prayer "Increase my faith." And both these prayers are from other places in scripture.

So the thing that made Solomon famous was, shortly after he became the king of Israel at 12, God told him he could ask for anything he wanted. Blank slate, whatever you want Solomon, it's yours. And instead of asking for wealth or honour Solomon said:

I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties... so give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. (1 Kings 2:7-9)

That's the attitude God loves. Jesus loves it when we ask for the wisdom to do what He has put before us so we can live in a way that honours Him. And so James says this is a prayer God answers. Pray "Jesus, give me the wisdom to look at the trials I am facing and instead of being destroyed by them see them as opportunities to be conformed to Your image – give me wisdom."

And Jesus says "yes" – He always says "yes," James says... unless you doubt when you ask. If you doubt then you are double-minded and you won't get anything from God.

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Now what's this? I mean don't we need wisdom because we can't see how difficult situations could possibly help us grow? Isn't this hard enough? Now we have to do it without doubting? I don't know if I have that much faith? What if I waiver when I ask? Is it all for not then?

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Here we get to the second prayer James leads us to: the “increase my faith” prayer. And it is Jesus who gives us insight into the faith/doubt prayer. So in Mark 9 we read the account of a demon possessed boy:

So they brought [the demon possessed boy to Jesus]. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” (Mark 9:20-22)

This is a desperate situation. Can you imagine if your child was in bad shape like this? You would have paid for every cure and been willing to try anything. And in this attitude you find yourself before Jesus one day. “If You can do anything Jesus it would be really nice.” And then Jesus responds:

“If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:23-24)

And I resonate with this father. “I believe you Jesus. I believe You’re God. I believe You can do anything... but part of me doesn’t. Part of me doubts.

Is there anyone else like me here today; you have faith but it often seems no bigger than a mustard seed? Is that enough faith for Jesus? Let’s see:

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, He rebuked the impure spirit... The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. (Mark 9:25-27)

This is way more than the father expected. There is good news for us here. Jesus says when you find yourself in a spot where you are fighting doubt and you want to come out on top that’s enough. It’s enough to say Jesus I believe, but I’m doubting at the same time. Come and help me. Jesus will meet you there.

And the fact is all of us need this because all of us end up here from time to time. There is no one who lives in the sin infused world we do and believes faultlessly.

The fact is we are all weak, we all waiver. And Jesus knows this. And Jesus meets us where we are.

So what's double-minded then because Jesus doesn't meet those people.

Well a double-minded "Christian" says "I believe in Jesus but God isn't going to change my situation so I'm not going to pray for it. Sure my marriage is in trouble, and my work situation is terrible, and I've got health problems and all sorts of problems, but I'm good. Yes I believe God could do it, but I'm not going to pray for Him to intervene in my life. I'm fine without it."

James says if you aren't going to put your faith into action you aren't going to get anything from God. So quit fooling yourself, you aren't a Christian unless you are willing to put your faith to work.

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But my faith is so weak, what happens if I pray for Jesus to make a change in my life and He doesn't. What will I do then? Won't I loose the little bit of faith I've got? Won't I be worse off?

That's double-minded. Stop that. If you believe in Jesus then pray for Him to make a difference in your life, and pray for the wisdom to see both the difference He starts making and to mature in your faith when He doesn't do what you think He ought to. Pray for Jesus to change you, or be double-minded.

James keeps going. Look at verse 9.

[Read James 1:9-12]

James says there is another problem we face when we try to view difficulty as an opportunity to become Christ-like, and it is the comparison problem.

If you are on Facebook you probably will have noticed that everyone else has an awesome life. I mean it's snowing and wet and cold in your life but as soon as you turn on Facebook someone is posting pictures of their Mediterranean cruise? Ever notice that? And when I see this all I want to do is eat a whole bag of chips and watch TV all night. It doesn't help me.

So James says don't just fight doubt, but fight the desire to compare yourself to others because you are never going to win that fight, and in reality the grass isn't greener on the other side anyway. The rich people you're lusting after aren't any better off than you – they will die and take nothing with them just like you. So they aren't truly blessed. The truly blessed person is the one who learns to persevere under trial – that's the high position. So take confidence, take joy. God is leading you to maturity.

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Hmmm... But if God is using difficulty to make me grow how can I be sure He isn't just getting His kicks from watching me go through hard times." Ever wonder that? People in James' day did. So look at verse 13.

[Read James 1:13-15]

So God uses difficulty to bring us to maturity. In Romans Paul says:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.
(Romans 8:28)

Now this doesn't mean God makes good things happen to His people, it means when bad things happen God brings something good out of them – He doesn't waste bad things. He uses them to conform us to His image, and that's the best thing that can happen to us.

But it isn't always easy from our perspective to see this – actually in my experience it is never easy to see this.

And so James warns us against thinking God is out to get us in our moment of darkness. We can start to think that God is tempting us and trying to see if we will deny Him and throw in the faith towel.

But James says that's not what is happening. God doesn't do that. He never messes with temptation – that's not His thing. Rather if you are struggling with temptation the source is in you not Him. And then James gives us an incredibly graphic – rated R – picture.

He says it is your own sinful desires that drag you off and seduce you. And the baby you conceive with evil desire starts growing – it's a sin baby. And when sin's gestation is done you birth it. But the baby isn't beautiful, it's grotesque and morbid. The baby is death. Can you picture it? This is the kind of stuff that nightmares are made of.

And this is what always happens with sin. The lie of sin is that God is holding out on you, He doesn't want what is best for you, and so if you just throw off His rules and do the forbidden– whatever that is – then you are going to be richer for it. But it never works out that way. When evil desire is the father, the baby that is conceived is always death.

Adam and Eve found this out in Genesis 3. The evil desire that the devil coaxed out of them was that they could be equal to God if they ate the fruit. God was holding out on them, but they could best Him and become like Him.

And so they gave in. And then they found out that the promise sin made was a lie. Adam and Eve were left with less not more – they were left with death. And this is always the way it is with sin.

But this isn't the way it has to be; this isn't what God wants for us. God isn't toying with you and waiting for you to fail. He loves you, He is for you and He wants you to have something good – He wants the best for us. Look at verse 16.

[Read James 1:16-17]

Don't be deceived. Don't be fooled by your evil desires. Don't be seduced by your flesh. Don't give in and believe that God isn't good – it's a lie. Now "Yes," you are going to experience hard times – they are coming if they aren't here already. And yes, God has a plan for these hard times. But it's not a plan to make you suffer, it's a plan for your good. God is for you.

You see God doesn't just bring good out of bad, He also gives us everything that is good. In fact there is nothing good that doesn't originate with the Father of Heavenly Lights.

So if you had strength to get out of bed this morning, that's good; it came from God. And if you are going to get to eat lunch this afternoon – that's something that most of the world won't do. Provision is a blessing, and it comes to us from the Father of Lights.

Or do you have any good relationships? Have you been blessed with a friend or a wife or husband? They came to you from the Father of Lights. Actually they came from Him even if they aren't perfect – anyone have an imperfect spouse?... They are God's gift to help you mature. Your spouse is a gift from God.

God always gives good gifts, and there is no wavering with Him. He doesn't change like we do. He doesn't have bad days where He just needs to make someone miserable. He wills good for you all the time.

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Now yes God is disgusted by sin. He hates it. But every ounce of His aversion to your sin has already been poured out on Jesus. If you have come to the cross for salvation then Jesus has swallowed up everything you deserve from God. It's gone. And God won't go back on that. He doesn't change! Romans 8 says:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus... the Spirit... has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2)

That's good news! But maybe you aren't convinced. Maybe you are saying "yeah, but you don't know me. I'm disgusting. I've done too much."

Now that might sound like humility, but it's pride. Get over yourself. You aren't bad enough to thwart the power of the cross. Jesus is so much bigger than anything you've done. **God** took your place on the cross, so stop whining about how far you fall short and accept Jesus' gift. God chose to give it to **you**.

And this is where James finishes. Look at verse 18.

[Read James 1:18]

Friends, God has had His eye on you from the beginning. You haven't slipped into His kingdom by accident. You were chosen and designed to bring God pleasure. You are a first fruit of all His creation. You are one of the crowning jewels of His creativity.

And He knows what you are like; He knows you are broken. He knows you need Him desperately. But that's the point. He created you to need Him. He wants to be your God. And when we come to Him in that light it brings Him joy.

So trials and temptations are going to come. But consider it joy when they come because God is good and God is for you. This doesn't mean there is no pain in the midst of the difficulty, but it means there is no pain without meaning. God wants you to be mature. He wants you to become what He designed you to be, because He knows that is where you are going to be happiest. He knows that it will be through the fire that we will be re-forged into His image – and that's where joy is. So **Embrace the trials and temptations you face as the path to an abundantly good Father.**