

GOOD GRIEF: THE GOOD THING ABOUT BAD THINGS **A Sermon on James 1:1-4**

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Introduction and Overview to the Letter of James

In the forward of his book *Inside Out*, Larry Crabb writes,

“Modern Christianity, in dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world. The message, whether it’s from erring fundamentalists requiring us to live by a favorite set of rules or from erring Charismatics urging deeper surrender to the Spirit’s power, is too often the same: The promise of bliss is for now! Complete satisfaction can be ours this side of heaven.

“We are told, sometimes explicitly but more often by example, that it’s simply not necessary to feel the impact of family tensions, frightening possibilities, or discouraging news. [We are told that] life may have its rough spots, but the reality of Christ’s presence and blessing can so thrill our soul that pain is virtually unfelt. It simply isn’t necessary to wrestle with internal struggle and disorder. Just trust, surrender, persevere, and obey.

“The effect of such teaching is to blunt the painful reality of what it’s like to live as part of an imperfect, and sometimes evil, community. We learn to pretend that we feel now what we cannot feel until Heaven.

“But not all of us are good at playing the game. Those whose integrity makes such pretense difficult sometimes worry over their apparent lack of faith. ‘Why don’t I feel as happy and together as others? Something must be wrong with my spiritual life.’ To make matters worse, these people of integrity often appear less mature and their lives less inviting than folks more skilled at denial. And churches tend to reward their members who more convincingly create the illusion of intactness by parading them as examples of what every Christian should be.

“[But] beneath the surface of everyone’s life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear. And for good reason. We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. *An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of realism.*

“[This] experience of groaning, however, is precisely what modern Christianity so often tried to help us escape... Faith becomes the means not to learning contentment regardless of circumstances, but rather to rearranging one’s circumstances to provide more comfort. [We are told that] more knowledge, more commitment, more giving, more prayer — some combination of Christian disciplines — will eliminate our need to struggle with deeply felt realities. Yet there is no escape from an aching soul, only denial of it. The promise of one day being with Jesus in a perfect world is the Christian’s only hope for complete relief. Until then, we either groan or pretend we don’t.

“The effect of widespread pretense, whether maintained by rigidly living on the surface of life or by being consumed with emotionalism, has been traumatic for the Church. Rather than being salt and light, we’ve become a theologically diverse community of powerless Pharisees, penetrating very little of society because we refuse to grapple honestly with the experience of life.”¹

Those are challenging words, even haunting words. And they are very fitting words, appropriately setting the stage for us as we look at the letter of James — a letter that deals very seriously with the realities of life, which takes the blinders off, which talks openly and honestly about the reality of suffering and hardship in the Christian’s life.

Since you may or may not have had a good look at this letter before, let me make a couple more introductory comments before we dig in.

Martin Luther once called this letter “an epistle [or ‘letter’] of straw” — this is probably more instructive about the state of Martin Luther’s mind when he wrote that, than it is about anything else. And, to be fair to Luther, it must be said that he never doubted whether the letter ought to be part of the Bible. Luther’s feeling, rather, was that it should not be given as prominent a place as other letters, such as the letter to the Galatians. But Luther’s comments, while unbalanced, are reflective of the troubled history of this letter in the life of the Church — not so much from believers who have, for the most part, readily accepted and greatly loved the letter — but from some unorthodox academics and scholars who, for various reasons, have manufactured arguments for doubting its place within the Scriptures.

This struggle goes on today as Christians continue to misunderstand James’ strong emphasis on the Christian’s obedience as somehow being opposite or contradictory to Paul’s strong emphasis on grace. And so, some will actually pit one book against the other, typically siding with Paul and simply dismissing James’ very

¹ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*, pp. 13-14.

strong and necessary instructions to the church. Lord willing, I hope our brief look at this letter will spark your interest into a further study of this letter. And, through that study, I hope you will come to understand the very important contribution that James makes to our understanding of the Gospel — the good news of Jesus Christ. Further, I hope you will come to see how both then and now the teachings in this letter provide a helpful corrective to what can be an unbalanced and even destructive misreading of Paul's emphasis on grace.

Now, who was James? Most likely, this is James, the brother of the Lord (see Matt. 13:55), and not James the Apostle who was put to death by Herod (Acts 12:2) around A.D. 44. While James was not initially a believer in Christ (John 7:5), he apparently converted after Jesus was resurrected, and even met the risen Christ in person (1 Cor. 15:7). As for the time when James wrote, it was sometime after the death of James the Apostle, but before Paul wrote his first letter (Galatians), which was sometime around A.D. 48.

So, how can we best understand this letter? While James does not have the linear structure of other letters such as Romans, it is certainly not without structure. This is particularly clear in that certain themes appear more than once in the letter, such as the nature of God, the law, wisdom, poverty and wealth, Christian behavior, faith and works. It would seem then that James can best be described as a sermon, written in letter form, in which James is drawing the attention of his readers to various points which are deeply significant for the Church's life and health as a body of believers.

More specifically, as the people he addresses are Christians who are having a pretty bad time of it, James has a lot to say in this letter about suffering and hardship, about living wisely in the midst of (and even in spite of) all that, and about how to respond specifically to the trials themselves that are part of every believer's experience.

The Testing of Faith Develops Perseverance

With hardly a pause, from the opening words of this letter, James dives in, head first, into one of the most difficult realities of this life: the experience of hardship and suffering. And, as if that were not enough, James begins his treatment of this subject with the outrageous statement: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" — which sounds a lot like saying, "Sing with joy whenever you smash your thumb with a hammer." Now, how in the world can James say something like this? Is this really what he is saying? Well, Lord willing, we'll be able to answer that question at the end of our time this morning. However, in order to get there, we'll have to go the long way around, taking a few detours along the way.

As the first detour, I want you to notice, simply, how *the testing of faith develops perseverance* (Jam. 1:2-3). If you recall, in the introduction I spoke of how the Christians, at the time of this letter's writing, were experiencing great hardship *because* they were Christians. They were being given a difficult time by all sorts of people — the Jewish leaders, the Jewish population, the Roman government, the rich and powerful — all kinds of people were having a go at them.

James wanted these Christians to know, in the midst of their agony, that there was a purpose in all of it, that it was not without rhyme or reason. It was not some senseless, pointless, meaningless suffering; it was definite and even deliberate. This is the hard lesson that those who have persevered through suffering have learned. And it is a deep but painful tuition in a school that nobody chooses but from which God expects all his children to graduate.

After our daughter Melanie died, in Australia, a friend of mine who was not a Christian asked me whether the occasion of her death ever caused me to doubt the existence of God or the extent of his power and authority. I told my friend that it had not caused any of those things and that, in fact, the effect was quite the opposite. I told him that the last thing I wanted to believe, as a grieving parent, was that Melanie's death was meaningless, that it was simply another sad accident in a universe that is going on of its own accord with no purpose and no particular direction. The last thing I wanted to believe was that this happened to her because somehow there was a glitch in God's program, that there was a renegade segment of the universe that was somehow outside of his sovereign purposes.

My non-Christian friend was struggling to believe that God — at least as my friend imagined him — could have had anything to do with Melanie's death. But I tell you I would have struggled even worse if I believed for a moment that God didn't have everything to do with it. James is assuring his brothers and sisters in Christ that the trials that have come into their lives are not meaningless, nor are they somehow outside God's plan and purposes for them. God's plan is to mature them, to complete them, to restore their fallen humanity fully — a restoration that Christ perfectly modeled in his time on earth.

And in order for them to be made complete, perfect, and mature, they had to learn perseverance. And perseverance, by its very nature, can only be learned in the heat of trial and hardship. How else could one learn it? The same is true for any other Christian virtue worth having. How does one learn courage, except in the face of fearful circumstances? How does one develop patience, except in the midst of exasperating conditions?

The qualities that mark out the true humanity that God is shaping within us do not simply appear out of the blue, full-blown within a person's character, as if one could receive a kind of spiritual injection of "love" or "wisdom" or "perseverance." No, if you are to have a persevering character, then it will only *develop*, and even more, it will only be *evident*, in the midst of events that require one to persevere, to fight on, to keep going, even though there are other voices and other "wisdoms" saying you ought to quit, that you ought to throw in the towel.

So, James says to his Christian family that the trials they are experiencing are the work of God and serve God's good purposes for them. Are we, then, to believe that the experience of trials automatically, infallibly, unfailingly produces maturity? No. It is quite possible for a person to be subjected to many trials and never develop the least bit of maturity through them. James does not say that trials produce maturity. He says that *persevering through trials* produces maturity. And that is a horse of a different color.

The story is told of two educators in a local high school who were applying for the same vacant Vice-Principal position. One applicant had been teaching a total of eight years and the other a total of twenty. After all was said and done, the applicant with eight years experience received the position. When the other applicant complained to the School Board about this, he said that he should have been the one to receive the position because he had twenty years of experience — more than double the amount of the one who had been given the job. In reply, the School Board said to the man that, after reviewing his application and references and record, their conclusion was that he did not, in fact, have twenty years of experience. Rather he had one year of experience, which he had repeated nineteen times.

One can have a lot of “experiences” and yet still be quite inexperienced. One can be subject to many trials, and yet never learn the first lesson from any of them. When James wrote these words, he was not speaking of the gaining of perseverance as if it were an automatic quality. As you read further into the passage, you’ll see that James’ assumption is that the person facing the trial will do so faithfully, and without doubt. That is, as the person endures the trial, she will not cling to God less, but more. She will not talk less to him, but more. She will not listen for his voice in a casual manner, but will be driven to the Scriptures, seeking a Word from the Lord as a person gasping for air.

Perseverance is the *Path* to Maturity

The second thing I want you to notice follows on from the first and, while fairly obvious, I think it is still worth pausing to think about for a moment. As we have already seen, the testing of faith develops perseverance. Here’s the next bit: *perseverance is the path to maturity*.

We are not to imagine that there might be some other way ahead in the Christian life. A person could question why God has chosen to work as he has. A person might doubt that perseverance is necessary to becoming fully human. But to doubt that perseverance through trial is the right way requires one to be wiser than God himself. Because, you see, the God of the universe, the God who allowed his own Son to suffer in his humanity, has deemed that this, and not some other way, is the path to maturity and completeness in Christ. And so we might be tempted, at times, to question God’s methods. But who are we to say to the Creator that there are other and better ways? Who are we to suggest that there are possibilities that have not occurred to God? Who are we to suppose arrogantly that the full restoration of our humanity might come through some means apart from the perseverance that comes through trial and suffering?

And yet, the truth is that we are sometimes tempted to ask, or at least wonder, these things, aren’t we? And sometimes we still ask the question – not in arrogance, but rather in pain because we are hurting, we are suffering and we want relief. And when you are in the midst of suffering and hardship, that is when you need to know, as certainly as you know anything else in your life, that this is the path, that you are not in the wrong place, that you are not going the wrong way.

When I was a boy, I once attempted to jump up on the kitchen counter to get a glass out of the cabinet. But on this one particular occasion, I had not looked up very carefully and so did not notice that the cabinet door was open, right above me. Well, when I jumped, I did so with all the typical exuberance of a

young boy and the corner of the cabinet door and my forehead had an unfortunate meeting.

About half an hour later, I'm laying on a bed in the emergency room, waiting to get stitches put in, and the doctor comes up to me carrying what at the time appeared to be about a 9-inch hypodermic needle, full of a local anesthetic, so that he could do his work. However, being a young boy, I didn't understand about anesthetics — all I could see was a huge needle and the fact that he was going to stick it in the one place where I thought I had already experienced enough pain for one day — my forehead. So, in a panic, I looked up at my parents, who had cut short their date to rush to the hospital — and they were smiling. And because they were smiling, and because I trusted them, I knew that, even though I didn't like it, it must have been okay and the doctor was not crazy after all, and that I must have needed the needle in my forehead.

But, you see, it's like that when you are hurting and suffering, isn't it? When you are hurting, when you are struggling, when you are in pain, you need to know then more than ever that you are definitely in the right place and on the right path. And these are the kinds of people to whom James is writing, people who are hurting and struggling in so many ways because of their faith — people who are looking up at a nine-inch needle, so to speak. James is assuring them that the situation is not out of control; the ship is on course, the Captain is at the helm.

Perseverance is the Path to *Maturity*

Not only is it true, that *perseverance is the path to maturity*, it also bears emphasizing that *perseverance is the path to maturity*. Again, this is probably all too obvious to you, and I'm sorry if that's the case, but I still think it bears pointing out.

It is not at all difficult to find Christians who will agree that the goal of spiritual maturity is a good thing. But, it is notoriously difficult to find Christians thinking and praying in ways that show that they really believe this, or rather that they believe in God's means of making maturity a reality in a person's life.

James makes it crystal clear that perseverance through trial is a fundamental part of God's way of growing and maturing his people. And yet, if we are honest, how often do we remember this truth when we pray, or when we grumble and complain about our circumstances to one another? To listen to some Christians pray, to hear some prominent pastors teach, you would think that hardship and suffering are to be regarded as an abnormality in a Christian's life — as if trials were an indicator of something wrong in your spiritual life, some lack of faith, some hidden and secret sin; as if the lack of hardship and suffering

was the truest and best indicator of God's blessing and fatherly concern for you.

James paints a very different picture than that, doesn't he? If you take the implications of what James is saying to heart, you come to a startling conclusion: to pray for a trouble-free life, to ask God for a painless, smooth, wrinkle-free existence, is in some ways to ask God to allow you to remain immature and incomplete. To pray for these things with that sort of attitude is to say to God, "I know that your plan for me is that I might be mature and complete and lacking in nothing, but frankly I would be quite happy, Lord, if you would just let me remain an unfinished project. Leave off that final coat of varnish, and please don't worry about the rough edges too much."

Does that mean that it is wrong to ask for help and deliverance in times of trouble? Of course not. What is wrong is to believe that when God chooses not to deliver you from trouble it means he doesn't care, or isn't in control, or isn't real, or doesn't love you, or is inevitably punishing you for some spiritual deficiency in your life. What is wrong is to pray for maturity, and then complain and rebel when God sends you the trials through which maturity comes. What is wrong is to believe the lie that says that the sign of God's blessing and concern for you is that everything in your life is working out beautifully, everyone in your family is perfectly healthy, the birds are singing, and you have \$300,000 in your savings account. Quoting from Larry Crabb's *Inside Out* again:

"When relieving pain is not our final purpose in life, then it's reasonable to make our self as comfortable as a responsible and moral approach to life permits. But when relief of the inevitable pain of living in a fallen world becomes our priority, at that moment we leave the path toward pursuing God. God's prescriptions for handling life do not relieve an ache that is not meant to cease this side of Heaven; they enable us to be faithful in the midst of it."

So, you see, the problem does not arise when you ask for deliverance in times of trouble. The problem arises when your request stems from the belief that while God may and can bless, he does not do so by working sovereignly through hardship and suffering.

Conclusion

All of which leads us back to the opening question: How can James say to these people, "Consider it pure joy, when you face various trials"? The key to understanding James' words lies in thinking about James' first word: "consider."

James is not saying that we are to shout exuberantly at the news that we have just received a demotion at work, or that our neighbor's child has leukemia,

or that our husband has just confessed to an adulterous relationship. James does not say, "Feel joyful," or, "Put on a happy face," when these sorts of things happen. No, James says that the joy we experience amidst trials is a considered joy, a joy that comes as a result of reflection and meditation on the way of God with us, the way of god in the world. It is a mature joy, not giddiness or hysteria. It is a joy that is comfortable and completely compatible with tears. It is a joy that sees with the eyes of faith and understands that the last chapter is yet to come.