

James – Faith in Action
Count it Pure Joy
James 1:1-4

Michael and Ruth had been happily married for 18 years, when all of a sudden their 15 year old son Paul became seriously ill. They learnt with horror that his body was riddled with cancer. The next 18 months became a nightmare as he battled the disease. All the family could do was helplessly watch him die. Burnt into their memories is the way he suffered. At times he would scream with the pain. It would last for about 20 minutes and then ease off. But it would happen five times a day.

The months of chemotherapy were the worst. It was ghastly. Every morning he would vomit till 10 –11 o'clock. If they took him out in the car he would vomit all the time.

Michael and Ruth are Christians. They turned to God. They prayed. They had a group of friends who met every week to pray. They went to healing services... but Paul still died.

When these sorts of things happen, the first thing we ask is why? God, if we love you and you love us, why do you allow this to happen?

Today we start a new series in the book of James called faith in action. James is one of the most practical books of the bible and while I would love to say that we are going to come away with some nice neat answers to those big why questions, we are not, I don't think anyone can give a cover all answer, but James does have quite a bit to say around the issues of Faith and practicalities of life.

It is generally accepted that the book of James is written by Jesus' little brother, probably Jesus' oldest brother. James was there when no one else was there, he grew up with Jesus. They ate together, they played together, they lived together. James was there before the disciples were there, before the critics were there. James was there as Jesus' little brother to see him learn, to see him grow, to see him resist temptation, to see him overcome trials. If you want to hear the truth about someone, talk to their brother.

In James 1:1 he starts by telling us,

*This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 I am writing to the "twelve tribes"—Jewish believers scattered abroad.
 Greetings!*

In other words “*Giddy, My name is James. I serve Jesus and all Christians, wherever they are.*”

I could spend a bit of time here talking about those three words “I serve Jesus”. For a little brother to say that he serves his older brother, that is something. Jesus must have done something right. And the fact that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and his younger brother still serves him, that probably means that he is the Son of God. Anyway I don’t have time to talk about that!

In verse 2, he gets straight to the point and warns us about the hard days, the dark days, the difficult days, the painful days.

I like that he starts here. There is no froth and bubbles. He says, “Hi I’m James serving all Christians, and it’s not easy out there, but let me assure you Christianity works when you need it most.” Jesus works most when you need him most. The Holy Spirit works when you need him most. And there are certain days that we need God like we’ve never needed him before. So he starts by telling us that yes sometimes life is hard.

We don’t do a good job at telling unbelievers that sometimes, even with Jesus, life is hard. There is the temptation to tell them, “Life is hard. Give your life to Jesus and breeze straight through to heaven.” We forget to tell them about the middle bit? The hard bit, that’s called life.

Life is hard before we meet Jesus - We meet Jesus - Life will still be hard and probably it’ll get harder, and later it gets better, when you see him. The Christian life is the best life, but it’s not the easiest life, and sometimes the closer you are to Jesus, the more resistance you receive, just as Jesus did.

James says and I love the way the Message writes it:

2-4 Consider it a sheer gift, friends, (or count it pure joy) when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. 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.

That is a fascinating passage, that has been misunderstood in so many ways. Let’s have a look at it and let me start by suggesting what he’s not saying.

Four Things God is not saying in the midst of a trial

Before we examine what God is saying through James, I want to look at what you might be feeling in the midst of your trial. When those seasons come, our

emotions tend to be very elevated and escalated. We feel sometimes more clearly than we think. That's normal but not necessarily helpful. And I want to tell you first of all **what he's not saying**, then we'll return to the text to see what he is saying.

1. He Is Punishing You

When life is hard, God is not punishing you. It can feel like he is? Hard day, God must be punishing me. You look back in your life, "OK, what did I do. I must have done something wrong. God is going to punish me to pay him back for what I have done or failed to do." That's a lie; it's not true. You may feel it, but don't feed it. God does not punish his people, Jesus took on that on the cross.

Yes we may reap what we sow, we make bad choices, we live with the implications and complications of our own stupidity, but God never punishes his people for their sin. How can I say that - He's already punished Jesus. We need to understand that.

Sure we reap what we sow, we do dumb stuff, consequences happen but that is not God punishing us,

2. He Is Failing You

God is not failing you.

- "God, you said you love me. It doesn't feel like it.
- God, you said you'd provide for me. I'm not seeing it.
- God, there are some promises from you but they don't come true in my life.

You are failing me."

You may not say it like that, but you may feel it. God can't fail! He doesn't say oops, missed that opportunity, or darn, forgot to rescue that person!

3. He Has Abandoned You

When life is hard, it does not mean that God has abandoned you.

It's easy sometimes to believe that God is near when times are good, and it's hard to believe that God is near when times are hard. You need to take God at his word. Jesus says, "*I'll never leave you. I'll never forsake you. I'll be with you always.*" That's one of the last things he told us before he returned to heaven.

God has not abandoned you. You are not an orphan. God is not a Father who looks at you and says, "Well, good luck kids," and walks out the door. He doesn't abandon you.

4. He Will Make It All Better For You

Some of us have more of a greeting-card Christianity than a biblical Christianity. And the greeting-card Christianity is this: it's hard, it's going to be great, just wait, OK? Some of you have been waiting a while? God doesn't promise that things will change, God promises that you can change. God doesn't promise, "Well, life's hard. Just wait, it'll get better." Maybe not. It might get worse.

Three Things God Does Say About Trials

Back to the text, James 1:2-4. What he does say is that life is sometimes hard.

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. 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.

1. You Are Going to have Trials

He says. "When tests and challenges come." He doesn't say "if." "If" would be nice but no it's "when". That means there is a 100% chance of having a hard time! Not good odds really. If I was a betting man?

New Christians, are often shocked by this. "Oh no, a trial came, Christianity isn't working." No, it's working and James says right up front, "it's going to hurt."

So, point number one, when trials come, don't say, "God, how come, where, why? I don't understand. What? I had no idea.

God says, "No, I told you they're coming."

2. It's A Test And An Opportunity

James tells us "When the trials come..., it's a test. A test can be a good or a bad thing. It depends on how good you are at taking the test. If you pass the test, it's actually really encouraging. Generally speaking tests aren't much fun.

Generally people aren't queuing up to take a test. However if you do take a test, and yes they are generally a little stressful, and later you get your result and you pass, that's great, you feel good!

Life is filled with tests, spiritual tests. A trial is a test.

A test or a trial is an opportunity. It's an opportunity to prove who you are in Christ, to see who you're becoming in Christ. When it first hits, it feels like an

attack. Some will say, it's an attack of the devil, take it away, pray against it. James says, "I want you to know this. It's a test." It's an opportunity.

3. You Will have Trials of Various Kinds

There are financial trials, emotional trials, physical trials, spiritual trials, mental trials, relational trials, marital trials, vocational trials. James says, "tests and challenges come at you from all sides." In other words you don't know where it's coming from next. It could be coming from anywhere. Any aspect of your whole life. And they don't always come one at a time.

And sometimes what happens is, you get through a trial in one area of your life, you're like, "Glad that's over," and then there's a trial in another area of life. I got my finances in order, and then my relationship fell apart. Now I'm in another trial.

Mature and well-developed

So, he's telling us that trials will come. We need to know that they are a test and then James says

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

An older translation says we will gain steadfastness and maturity.

Steadfastness is this perseverance, this courage, this strength. The Bible uses the language elsewhere of, "Stand firm." It's like a command to a soldier, "Hold your post." You endure, you persevere, you weather the storm, you make it through, don't give up. And he says, "*If you will receive it as a trial, a test, and an opportunity, and it will produce steadfastness, endurance, then it'll result in maturity.*"

What this means is you'll become more Godly, you'll become more like Jesus. The trial will be used to transform you.

Do you want to be more like Jesus? Do you want a trial? They're the same question. It's like saying, "I want to be muscly without working out. I want to learn a lot without reading books, or with being trained." It doesn't work that way. Cause, effect; reap, sow. Endurance produces maturity.

The reason why some of us are immature is because we have no endurance. To develop endurance we need trials, why do we pray against trails when they do us so much good.

What that means is our godliness is not in spite of our problems, it is because of our problems. And he says, “I need you to know this so that when you’re in the middle of it, you receive it as an opportunity from God and not an obstacle.”

Religious Cheerleaders

He says, “When all of this happens, you can consider it a sheer gift or count it pure joy.” What’s with that?

Many people use this passage in all the wrong ways, they think they have to always be happy, be a cheerleader for Jesus, carry around pom poms, praising God when they get hit by a car, (at least it wasn’t a bus), count it pure joy, count it pure joy.”

What does it mean to count it pure joy? I think the message helps us with their translation “*consider it a sheer gift*” it’s got nothing to do with happiness. Happiness is great, I love it, but happiness is because of your circumstances, your boss says I’m giving you a raise, you’re happy. But what happens when the doctor doesn’t say, “You’re better”; and he says, “You’re sick”? Or your boss doesn’t say, “You get a raise.” But “You’re fired.” You didn’t pass that test, you failed? What do you do then?

Happiness is because of your circumstance. Joy is in spite of your circumstances. It’s that peace that surpasses understanding. It’s crazy joy. It doesn’t make sense. It’s a fruit of the Spirit. Joy in spite of the tests and trials.

Tests and trials will come. You may be in the middle of one now. You probably don’t want to hear this, but know that they are opportunities for you to grow. Call on God, trust him and Matthew is going to preach on this next week (verses 5-8), call on God for his wisdom, for God is generous.

Through this trial you can become more steadfast, more mature, *well-developed, not deficient in any way*. You can rejoice, not in the circumstance, but in the Lord, who will change you to become more like Jesus.

Prayer

Let’s face it, Lord, the concept of regarding trials with pure joy, a sheer gift, is an impossible dream for many of us. We accept, though that you set this before us and we humbly ask your help in moving towards it.
Amen.