

James: Where Faith Gets Real

When the Heat is On

Glen Elliott - September 3, 2017

Series Big Idea: James is one of the most practical books in the Bible, tackling the real life issues and struggles that all of us face: temptation, self-control, work, anger, poverty, our words, prejudice and more. The book challenges our consumeristic and complacent nature as Americans and challenges us to live out a faith that is active and makes a difference. It is a book that combines the teachings of Jesus with the wisdom of the Proverbs to show us the perfect law that gives freedom. James' whole purpose is to help us make sure our faith gets real in everyday life.

Message Big Idea: We will face tough times and trials. Our faith will be tested. Our natural response is to complain when difficulties come our way! We want to be happy and we are frustrated when it alludes us. We are even annoyed at God for not making us happy and protecting us from difficulties. But God allows trials and tests to come because they are essential to help us grow. God uses trials to help us identify and remove the impurities from our lives. God's goal for us is not our happiness, but our holiness! Will we cooperate with the refining work of God or fight him?

Main Idea: God doesn't just want to make you happy, but holy.

Main Text: James 1:1-12

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. Why does God allow difficulties, pain, suffering, trials and challenges in the life of a Christian? What is the purpose God has for us through our trials and tests?
2. Share a time when you faced a challenge or trial and through the difficulty your faith grew, you dealt with any spiritual impurities and you were able to following Jesus better.
3. Respond to Glen's main idea: God doesn't want to make you happy, but holy. Share your thoughts and reactions. Do you agree or not? Why? What does holiness mean? Why is God interested in you experiencing more than happiness?
4. James 1:2-12 uses the word "persevere" 3 times. Explain what you think James means to persevere through a trial. Does it just mean to not give in or give up? Or does it go further than that? Why must we persevere?
5. James says the purpose of persevering through tests and trials is to become **mature and complete, not lacking anything**. What does it mean to you to become mature, complete, not lacking anything?
6. What challenge are you facing now that you could look at through the eyes of faith and not the eyes of happiness or comfort? How does God want you to use this trial to become more holy? What is this difficulty revealing about you that needs to change? How can your character mature because of this?

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Message:

For some of you right now, you are feeling the heat! And I don't mean the 100 degree heat outside. You are facing some really tough times. All of us have and will face difficulties that are more than frustrating. Let me dare ask the why question. Why does there have to be so many tough times in our all lives? Yes, there are those really great seasons of life too when things are smooth, peaceful and wonderful. But they are always tempered by the difficult seasons. Why?

Maybe the hardest part of my job is that I hear dozens of stories every week about people in our church who are facing a new trial. We are a military town. We so appreciate all of you who have and are serving in our armed forces. Thank you for your service - I really mean that! We know you face the danger of combat and experience months of deployment and separation from your family. And we've all had times when finances were really tough. We got into debt or lost a job or lost insurance and there just didn't seem to be enough paycheck at the end of each month. Some of us have had to face serious health issues like cancer, knee and hip replacements and such. And there are always the difficult relationships at work or school and struggles in our marriages. For centuries we've been asking why it has to be this way.

Without a clear answer to the why, it is easy to slip into complaining and grumbling. One piece of research tells us that complaining has all kinds of negative effects on our brains and may actually rewire our brains to make us more depressed and make it easier to complain. It also takes a toll on our physical health. But that's not even my primary concern. Complaining is really dangerous to our soul and spiritual health as well. That's where our faith comes in. We need a faith that helps us get past complaining to thriving.

So today we are going to start a new series based on a letter written by James, the brother of Jesus. We are calling this series *Where Faith Gets Real*. The letter of James is one of the most practical books in the Bible, tackling the real life issues and struggles that all of us face: temptation, self-control, work, anger, poverty, our words, prejudice and more. It is a book that combines the teachings of Jesus with the wisdom of the Proverbs to show us the perfect way that brings us freedom. James' whole purpose is to help us make sure our faith gets real in everyday life. In fact, the opening verses in the book of James will help us answer the question of why that I asked earlier. Is there a purpose and meaning to our struggles?

So let's jump right in and look at the book of James which starts with an opening greeting in James 1:1 (pg. 825 - NIV). Notice we got new Bibles in the seats with bigger print! ¹ **James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.** God inspired a man named James to communicate his truths to us through this letter. Who is this James? James was the brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. Can you imagine what it must have been

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like for James to grow up in the shadow of his half-brother Jesus. He probably heard a hundred times Mary say to him: "Why can't you be like your brother Jesus?!" Totally unfair, right! I mean Jesus was literally the perfect child! James would have never been able to win an argument with his brother Jesus and must have been more than frustrated for all the times he got in trouble while Jesus NEVER got in trouble!

There was a time when James and his other brothers did not believe Jesus was the Son of God (John 7:5). And the family, at one point, even believed Jesus was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). But all that changed after Jesus rose from the dead and Jesus appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7)! James became a believer and then became a leader of the church in Jerusalem. But it is interesting that James never introduces himself as Jesus' brother in this letter! My guess is that everyone he was writing to knew that! He didn't feel the need to pull the "I'm Jesus' brother" card.

James writes to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Twelve in the Bible is always a symbol for the people of God - twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles. James is writing to a predominately Jewish church that started in Jerusalem but was being scattered abroad because of persecution. Talk about trials and hard times!

Now let's get into the heart of his message. Look at how he starts. He dives right into the issue of struggle and the difficulties they were facing. Let's read James 1:2-4 (pg. 825 - NIV) - ² **Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,** ³ **because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.** ⁴ **Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.** So right from the start James says we could have nothing but joy in tough times! What?! Really?! How does that work? They had to flee, leave their homes and families to start over because of the persecution that came due to their new faith. Where's the joy to be found in all that?

We all face trials, even if not overt persecution. But a trial is more than just a challenge. The word used for trial here means a test to prove something. The engineers at Raytheon, one of our largest employers here in Tucson, have to put missiles through trials to test and prove they'll perform as needed. They know how vital it is to test and prove the reliability of their work.

Trials, challenges and hard times are also essential to our well being. They have a purpose in our lives. So James begins to address the "why" question! Trials are necessary in our lives. But here's the deal. We determine whether a trial brings us joy or cause us to complain and be miserable. You've heard the adage - a trial can make you better or bitter. When the heat is on it can either burn you or build you up. Trials can just be a pain or we can find a purpose in them. They can make us weaker or stronger in our faith. The trials in our lives can have a purpose, a good purpose, but only if we see them that way.

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Verse 4 is key. James says that if we really learn from the trials, there's a benefit. He says that trials can help us become mature and complete! Trials help us become more and more like Jesus. Challenges help us weed out the sin and junk in our lives and help us focus on what is real, true and worthy. Difficulties can help us become holy or more godly. James says as trials purify us, we end up with all we really want and lack nothing - WOW! The engineers at Raytheon keep putting the missiles through test after test to perfect it. God allows us to face trials to make us better.

Trials will come. Guaranteed! You can't escape them. So what James is saying is you can choose the attitude you will have as you face a trial. You can choose joy! Joy is a choice. Now, honestly, that is probably not our very first reaction or choice. It often takes a while to get to joy.

Joy is a deep sense that all is good, even when things are difficult. Joy knows that God is present and will work in and through the trial to test us and make us better. We can approach a trial with joy knowing that God is going to help us mature and be more like Christ. I love how A. W. Tozer says it: *"When I understand that everything happening to me is to make me more Christlike, it resolves a great deal of anxiety."* Joy replaces fear and frustration as we understand God's purpose in the trial. The joy is not in the pain, loss or suffering, but in the results of the trial.

So here's what James is telling us. This is my main point today. **God doesn't just want to make you happy, but holy.** God's primary concern isn't that you have a trouble free life. If your faith in God is to get you the easiest life possible, then you have made a bad decision. If someone convinced to you be a Christian so you wouldn't have any problems, they sold you a empty promise and I'm sorry. If you are looking to God to just make you happy, you'll be disappointed and eventually you'll be angry with God. God has a greater purpose for you. There's something far better than just being happy. He wants you to be holy. To be holy is to be set apart from the ways of the world and dedicated to the ways of Jesus. To be holy is to be like God. God says over and over - Be holy as I am holy. As we become more and more like Jesus, it is then and only then that we'll be able to deal with the problems that will come in a much better way.

It is through trials and testing that God makes us better which means more like Jesus. And James uses a really great word to help us get that. In verse 3 James says the "testing of your faith produces perseverance." The word testing here could be translated "smelting." We live in a copper producing state. There are mines all over Arizona that remove ore that has copper in it. The ore is taken from the ground and intense heat is applied to the rock which melts the copper. The smelting process removes all the impurities to get to the pure metal.

God allows us to face the heat through trials and tests so he can remove the impurities in our lives. Here's a fact. We'll never become more spiritual, more like Jesus, more

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holiness in only good smooth times. We grow when the heat is on. God allows the heat to help refine us, purify us and make us more like Jesus.

We pray to God to stop or protect us from trials. We ask God to take the troubles away, lower the heat and make us happy. And when he doesn't we are angry at God. But God often does not take away a trial because we would miss the better things that God has for us. God wants to make us holy, not just happy. Look for the why! Look for the purpose in the trial. He wants us to reflect Jesus by becoming more and more like Jesus. **God doesn't just want to make you happy, but holy.**

God is also saying that as we allow God to smelt our soul or remove the impurities and sin that mess us up, then we are better able to persevere! To persevere means to be intentional to allow the tough times to make us better. To persevere isn't just to wait out a problem. Too many of us do that. You can just wait it out and not grow!

To persevere, and James uses that word 3 times in the texts we'll look at today, means to go through a hard time and grow through it. Yes, it means we didn't give up or give in, but it means more than that! Persevere means to intentionally be victorious because of what we learned or how we grew through the trial. And here's the amazing thing. The more we do that, the better we are able to see God at work for our good through the tough times that will keep coming. We actually look forward to the challenges knowing that God will show up and show himself to be more than good. Then we can consider it all joy when trials come. Okay, it is not quite "Yes, bring it on!" But we can adjust our reaction from anger or frustration to joy.

So James is saying, instead of begging God to remove the challenges, see this as a joyful opportunity for God to do something really good in you. You have to want it. You have to look for it. That's why James says in James 1:5 (pg. 825 - NIV) this - ***⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*** Ask for wisdom to see how God wants to use a trial to purify you, remove the sin or negative spiritual baggage in your life so you can experience the better life God has for you. Our prayers should be more about asking God for wisdom to understand the tough times rather than just ask God to remove the tough times. We miss God's best because we are just trying to be happy rather than holy! May our prayers look more and more like this. "God, I don't like what I'm going through. But help me see how this test can help me think and act more like Jesus. Show me what needs to change in me through this challenge. And then change my attitude and heart and help me have courage to act how you want me to act."

Now, let's jump down to James 1:12 (pg. 825 - NIV) - ***¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*** So when we see the value of a tough situation to make us better, and let God grow our character and faith through the situation, we are blessed. That is a parallel idea to having pure joy! We

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have found something better than happiness. We've found God's favor. And that means we were victorious through the trial. Victors in that day got a crown or wreath. We persevered and won the battle. God promises us victory over hard times if we stand the test.

So the challenge of this book and the challenge of the verses we just read is this: will we choose to have a faith that gets real? Specifically today, will we apply our faith and trust in God to the situations in our lives that are really hard? What is the real goal of your life? Is it happiness? Or is it holiness? Is it what YOU want or is it what GOD wants? **God doesn't just want to make you happy, but holy.**

I want you to meet a couple that has seen more than their share of trials. This is **Dave and Lisa Thoresen**. Dave is our pastor of global outreach. They have three amazing kids. Dave has chronic headaches. Lisa endured aggressive life-threatening breast cancer. Their son got sick from mold so they had to move out and basically demolish their house. It was not only a huge inconvenience but came at a great cost. That's a lot to bear.

Have you both ever asked the question I was asking in this message - "Why?" Why the continual difficulties and challenges?

Do you have an answer to the why question?

Have you been able to find joy through all this? If so, how and what does it look like?

Even pastors, like David, experience trials. We all do. What challenge are you facing now that you could look at through the eyes of faith and not the eyes of happiness or comfort? Look at your challenge and ask God: how do you want to use this to help me and make me more holy? What is this difficulty revealing about me that needs to change? How can my character mature because of this?

Maybe this spiritual truth reveals some spiritual doubt in God? Is God's purpose good? Does God want the best for you? Is he willing to let you struggle so you can get to a better place? Is he willing to test your faith so it will be even stronger? Or is God bad if he wants to burn away some impurities in our lives? Yes, the heat is painful! But wrestle honestly with the doubt and questions and don't do that alone.

Without God being real, without your faith being real, then it is very hard to find a purpose in our trials. And if we can't find the purpose, we can't find hope. Without hope we cannot thrive. May your faith come to life so you can see the purpose in your suffering and find hope which never fades.

Song: Give Me Faith (Elevation)