

### **House of Refuge Statement**

Before we begin our time together in God's Word, I want to take a moment to refresh us in our commitment to care well for one another.

[Read statement]

Thank you, friends. It's a privilege to serve in a community that wants to love like Jesus.

### **Introduction**

If you haven't yet opened your bibles to James 1, go ahead and get there. We're taking another step in our Everyday Faith series and today's text really gets us right where we're at.

### *Working Out*

I'm going to need an umbrella of grace as I begin because I'm going to ask a ridiculous question. How many of you enjoy working out? I'm not talking about taking a walk, floating in the pool or doing four-ounce curls while eating a cheeseburger. I'm talking about really working out, doing stuff that makes you wonder 'why am I doing this?' Like strength training, swimming distances, biking, running, doing cross fit or interval training...that kind of stuff!

If you go to a gym, you know what it's like every January: the place is crawling with fresh faces who have made resolutions to lose weight, get in shape, and become more active. But working out is hard. There are times where you feel like you can't catch your breath and your heart is racing. Your body often aches that day or the next because you're using muscles you forgot you had. Sometimes you over-do it and basically put yourself out of commission for a few days because you can hardly walk or lift your arms.

Those painful hurdles are often enough to make the newbie quit. Couple the pain and regular discomfort with scheduling difficulties and there are plenty reasons for people to stop going. *But*, when you don't quit, when you stick with it, when you push past the discomfort and realize the resistance makes you strong; when the ache isn't an unwanted stranger but a welcome reminder that you're growing and getting healthier, you find yourself actually enjoying the process. You see real results, like greater stamina and strength, more energy and maybe even better fitting clothes. And all of the sudden, you're glad you went through it and you're willing to keep doing it! Some of you will even pay another person to push you harder and further, just so you can continue to grow and improve.

What we're going to see in today's text is similar. It definitely involves pain and struggle, discomfort and suffering. But the benefits go way beyond good health and a nice physique. Take a look at James 1:2-5, 12. I'm reading from the NIV. [READ]

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. <sup>5</sup> 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.

*[skip down to verse 12]*

<sup>12</sup> 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."

## **About Trials**

James was writing to Jewish Christians who weren't living in Israel. Persecution for their faith had forced them to scatter to other regions. Unfortunately, many in the church had been led astray by false teachers which made them divisive and intolerant. They played favorites and were

all about status and wealth instead of loving one another. Today's text is aimed at helping them to properly understand that adversity isn't about God's displeasure, but it's an opportunity for God to purify and strengthen those He loves.

So James says, 'When trials come, consider it pure joy...' That sounds absurd. No one in their right mind celebrates a cancer diagnosis. No one rejoices when they lose their job or their marriage falls apart. No one parties when a friendship ends or they're persecuted for their faith. Everyone I know *avoids* pain, trial or suffering at almost any cost.

The trials James has in mind are unanticipated and unwanted experiences—not temptations. That's later in the chapter. Trials aren't to tempt you to sin, but test your faith. Not to see if you *have* faith, but to strengthen the faith you have. In His sovereignty, God allows trials to come your way to help shape, grow, develop, and purify your faith. They're not intended to destroy you but to deepen you. Each time a trial comes your way, you have an opportunity to trust God and become more like Jesus. Every trial is filtered through God's fingers, so none of it comes to you without Him knowing and allowing it. In His lovingkindness, in His goodness, God has allowed your trials... to grow your trust and to help you become even more the person He designed you to be for His glory.

Trials can be the typical, unwanted, unavoidable stuff of everyday life. We get sick, lose jobs, wrestle in relationships, go through surgeries, grieve the loss of loved ones and lots more. Trials can even come directly from God to lovingly correct His children, just like a good father does.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the source, James says that those trials can result in pure, unmitigated joy—instead of anger, disappointment. And, for clarity, James isn't asking you to enjoy your trials. More about that in a minute.

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<sup>1</sup> See Proverbs 3:12, Hebrews 12:6

### *Desert experiences*

Can you imagine encountering a trial, a test of your faith, and instead of asking, "Why is God doing this to me?" asking, "What if God wants to use this to shape me?" That's what James is aiming at. Very often, when trials come, we feel as though we're in a wilderness or desert place. It's unfamiliar and scary. We've not been here before and we don't know how to proceed. We wonder if God is mad at us or wants to get rid of us. We don't know what to think or how to proceed.

That must have been how the Israelites felt when God led them out of Egypt and into the wilderness, the desert. There was nothing there. No water. No food. And the Israelites learned that they needed God to provide if they were going to make it. And He did. And they did. God didn't lead them into the desert to destroy them. The desert, the wilderness, was an invitation for them to get to know God. They knew *about* God but they didn't *know* God. So, for the next year or so, guided by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, they learned what He loved and hated, what He wanted and what He wanted for them. He gave them the 10 Commandments and all the laws. They learned about drawing near to Him and what the Tabernacle and sacrificial system was all about: atoning for their sin so they could be close to God. All of this happened *before* spies were sent into the Promised Land to check it out. This was *before* they sinned by not trusting God to lead them to conquer that land and possess it. It was only *after* their sin that they spent 40 years wandering, waiting for a whole new generation to learn about what it meant to know and trust God.

Wilderness experiences are invitations for you to know God. Moses met with God in the wilderness. Jesus regularly retreated to be alone with God—in the wilderness, solitary places, lonely places, mountainsides. The situation you find yourself in can be a beautiful invitation to spend time with God, even though the situation that got you there, sucks.

No one wants to go through a divorce or lose a job. No one wants a loved one to die or to have cancer. But what if God wants to use this to

shape me? What if He's inviting me into this scary, wilderness space so I can get to know Him better?

### **Thinking forward**

That's why the first two words of verse two are so important. "Consider it..." James is urging the reader to look at the trial, the trust exercise, and to think forward. Think ahead to when it's all over. As you go through this now, think about the future and what this trial could do to help you love and trust God even more deeply. What if God wants to shape me? What if this is an invitation?

When trials come and we freak out, it's often because we envision the situation and future as though we're alone—we picture going through the struggle without God. We think of trying to endure the suffering in our own strength. How am I going to get through this. We forget that, as God's kids, we're never alone and He's not asking us to go it alone. He will lead us through the hardship, holding us by His righteous right hand.<sup>2</sup> The question is, 'Will I trust Him?' Will I, like Dave Heitman said a couple weeks ago, hold onto Him with one hand even if I'm shaking my fist with the other? Or will I, like a toddler, jerk my hand away because I want to do it my way? By the way...it's okay to hold onto God and trust Him and, at the same time say, 'This sucks and I don't want it! But I trust You.'

When you think forward, remember that God is with you through it all. When you think forward, think of the thanksgiving and elation you'll have when it's finally over; when you have the job, the surgery is successful, the relationship is restored, when your school finals are over. You know the feeling: peace and overflowing joy! Even if the trial leads to your death, you'll rejoice in His presence like never before and enjoy an intimacy with Him that you've been longing for your whole Christian life.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 41:10

All the women who've had babies know exactly the feeling. Tremendous pain, anxiety, even discouragement, *but then...* the baby is born and oh the joy! Delivering your first child is uncharted territory and can be scary; you've never been there before. But if you have a second child, you know what's coming and you know the result and, even though it's deeply painful, you can think forward to the joy that's coming through the difficulty of labor and delivery.

### **Pure joy**

It's important to note that the joy is not *because* of the hardship, but because of what the hardship can produce. At Christmas we talked about how Jesus, 'for the joy set before Him endured the cross...' <sup>3</sup> Jesus didn't have joy because He was going to be crucified. There was joy because of what His crucifixion would accomplish: He would complete His earthly mission as our great High Priest and make salvation possible for the people He created and loved so much.

We can consider it pure joy not *because* of the trials, but because of what the trial can produce. If we will cooperate with God through the hardships, holding onto Him and trusting Him, we can become more mature in our faith. We'll look even more like Jesus and be better prepared to serve however He wants us to.

A quick word of caution: be careful with your words and love people well when they're suffering. Resist the temptation for platitudes. They may be true but an ill-timed word isn't helpful. If someone you love is going through it and you say, "Consider it pure joy..." they're going to punch you in the throat. Maybe don't say anything. Just be present and pray for them. The truth is, you don't know what God's doing in this, but you know He's good. Be the friend that's willing to say, 'This sucks. I'm sorry you're going through this.' Maybe later you can say, 'I don't know what God has in mind, but I know He's got you. You're not alone.'

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12:2

We're still learning what it means to trust God through the tough stuff. No one (in their right mind) signs up for the yuck. So, be gentle with each other and with yourself. It's okay to trust God and say, 'This sucks!' at the same time. Jesus was in the garden, anticipating His crucifixion, and said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."<sup>4</sup> Jesus went through the ultimate trial and didn't like it. He did it willingly, but He didn't like it. So I think it's okay if you don't like your trial and still choose to trust God.

### **The ongoing process**

James wants us to think forward to the unbridled celebration that will take place when the trial has produced in us an enduring, persevering, resilient, resolute, unwavering, unshakable trust that builds the character of Christ in us and helps us look even more like Jesus. That's what happens if we'll let struggles, hardships and suffering deepen our trust, our faith. Like working out, we'll become stronger and have greater stamina. The process is painful, but what it can produce is amazing. The perseverance that trials produce in us sets the table for all kinds of growth and fruitfulness. The tough stuff is what God uses to help us develop Christ-filled and Christ-focused lives. When you're in the desert and you don't have anything—all you have is God—and that's often when you're willing to listen to His heart and His plans. And, when you experience His provision, protection, goodness and grace through those grim times, you're really get to know and trust *Him*—and *that's* what draws you into an even more intimate relationship with Him.

### *Tough Times*

You can ask anyone who loves Jesus about the roughest times they've experienced and how God met them in their mess and they will tell you how good God is and how grateful they are for having gone through it. They're not grateful for the pain or suffering, but they're grateful for how God used it to make them who they are today. Most of the time they'll say, 'I wouldn't change a thing.'

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:42

We need to hold onto that when we encounter trials of many kinds because God's grace meets us uniquely in each of them. You already know that difficulties and struggles are just around the corner. Another opportunity to trust God and lean on His grace is on the horizon. And I don't say that in a pessimistic way, it's just true. Our lives are an ongoing process of sanctification and God, in His goodness, will use all kinds of events or circumstances to help us become more like Christ.

That's why I love talking with more seasoned saints—people who've tracked with Jesus for decades. It's amazing to hear them talk about God's faithfulness in the trials and, while they're at it, talk about one they're in the middle of, but it doesn't really shake them. God's been faithful before and they know He'll be faithful again—even if they don't get what they want. Trials come and those seasoned saints barely even wobble. By God's grace, they've cultivated perseverance through the tough stuff, and they have become people who are whole and holy. Mature and complete believers' lives exhibit a righteous stability that's rooted in God. They're not sinless, but mature in Christ; Not finished, but still in process. And, in increasing ways, Jesus sees His own reflection when He looks at them.

This is what happens in us when we embrace trials for what they are: opportunities to become more like Jesus. What if God wants to use this to shape me? What if He's inviting me to get to know Him better? That doesn't make hardship easier, but it can definitely adjust your attitude. Trials can be opportunities. But that doesn't mean we should go looking for them. Maturity isn't about the number of trials you go through, but how the trials were handled.

### **Just ask**

Sometimes we really wrestle to get our heads and hearts around the ordeal we're in. We just can't seem to get past the fear or anger or despair that the situation has created. We're struggling to figure out what it's all about. But God knows. Remember: He's with you. His Spirit resides

in you. You're not alone. So, when you don't get it, ask God for His wisdom. Worldly wisdom can't help. When you want to live in alignment with God's plans and purposes, who better to ask, 'What's happening right now?' than God! 'Lord, I need Your perspective on this. I need Your wisdom. I don't get it!' "We need wisdom to know how to cope with trials, [because] wisdom provides a clear view of our situation from God's perspective."<sup>5</sup> And from that perspective we can see how 'bad luck' or 'misfortune' is really an opportunity for God to bring about His purpose.

Here's the sweetest part, God welcomes the chance to give you the wisdom you need—you just need to ask. And He won't be stingy about it; He'll give it to you openhandedly. He wants you to draw close. He wants you ask. He won't hold out on you. Wisdom may not give you the full story of 'why' but it will remind you that God has you and He can be trusted—even through this.

### **In the end** (v 12)

If you are a Christ-follower, there was a time when you placed your trust in Jesus and began to follow Him. That's when you were saved. Saved from the penalty and power of sin and saved to God. You were rescued from an eternity separate from God and promised a joyous eternity with Him. There's so much that goes with that. The point is, if you've trusted Jesus, Heaven is in your future because God wants to be with you.

When you trust God, you're saved. And when you've lovingly trusted Him through the ups and downs, and this life fades, you'll receive the fullness of your salvation: eternal life. Think about that! When this life ends, the best is still to come. The One who loves you best and most, Who held you through all the difficulties and sorrows so you could know and trust Him more fully, will welcome you into His presence where nothing gets in the way anymore. No more sin. No more sorrow. No more trials. Just everlasting, overflowing, abundant joy. That's what's in store for those who love and trust Him.

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<sup>5</sup> Nystrom, David P. *The NIV Application Commentary: James* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1997), 50.

Every trial, every struggle, difficulty, hardship, suffering and distress is an opportunity to trust God and become more like Jesus. Each faith test is your chance to think forward, to the joy that awaits on the other side of it, knowing that God has invited you to come close and get to know Him even better.

Trials suck. But God is good. And each bump, hiccup, landmine and bitter tear is one more chance to get close to Him—to know Him, not just know about Him. Whatever you're going through, trust Him, friend. He loves you and He's got you.

### **Take Aways**

Before we go, I want to give you a just few practicals to take into your week.

I offer these as encouragements, not pithy quips or platitudes. My heart is for you. I know these are easier said than done. When trials come:

1. Remember that God is with you. You are not alone.
2. Ask yourself, "What if God's inviting me to know Him better? What if He wants to use this to shape me?"
3. Think forward (to the joy waiting on the other side).
4. When you don't get it, wisdom is yours for the asking. (and God gives generously)
5. It's okay to say, "I don't like this, but I trust You."

### **Wrap**

Right now, life is messy. Hearts ache. Suffering is real. But, one day, all will be made right and you will enjoy the fullness of your salvation as you are crowned with eternal life. Trust Him, friends. He's got you.

### **Pray**