

Falling into Joy

James 1: 1-8

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Consider it all joy my friends when you face trials of all kinds. Is that just the kind of word you want to hear? You get up in the middle of the night and head for the bathroom. You forget the stack of books you left on the middle of the floor. The sounds of your crash reverberate like thunder through the sleeping house. Your heart pounds; you'll be awake for hours now. And a sweet voice says from the bed, "Consider it all joy my dear!"

You sit at the gate in the airport watching the other passengers for your flight. You are unable to refrain from the demented game you play each time you fly. Which person will be your seat mate? You look around. You see a slender, tan figure, dressed in a fashionable suit-- looks like a model. Reading your favorite author. It's a three hour flight with a meal. This could be fun. You also see a gum-popping tourist, sporting numerous gold chains, talking so everyone can't help but hear, determined to make conversation with any poor creature that falls along the path. This is the kind of person that shares intimate medical details with strangers. And more, asks intimate medical questions of the same perfect strangers. It's a three hour flight, with a meal. Which one will be your seat mate? Consider it all joy my friends when you fall into various trials!

This seems like such backwards advice, turning our usual feelings upside down. The entire letter of James is full of surprising reversals on conventional wisdom. James likes to turn the tables on his readers. He is not often hailed for his theological depth, but his razor sharp insights on the daily life of the Christian are without parallel. Many scholars believe that this James was the brother of Jesus. Maybe he had spent his life trying to carve out his niche in the shadow of a rather stellar older brother. Imagine what James had to endure at school from the teachers in Nazareth. "We knew your brother. He never gave us any trouble, made all A's, a regular Messiah. So why can't you be more like him?" The Son of God was his brother. James could forget about competition. From early on he had to find out how this God-business worked out in real terms for ordinary people.

So his opening words to the Jewish Christians who had been scattered from their homes, driven all over the Mediterranean by persecution, who were hanging

on for dear life was, “Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Trials and difficulties which baffle and batter us test our faith. This testing produces perseverance, the ability to keep on in spite of obstacles toward a goal. Such perseverance strengthens us, building us into complete men and women of God. James says that the result of such perseverance through suffering is that we will lack nothing. Once again, he has turned conventional wisdom on its head.

Because when suffering comes, we immediately feel that we are lacking—
We lack peace because we are under so much pressure.
We lack the ability to move freely through the world because we are in pain and must be mindful of our bodies at every moment.
We lack easy conversation and light moments because the backspin of our conflicts affects every relationship.
We lack money and the ability to do or buy what we need and want because there’s just not enough to go around.
We lack confidence that we will see anything like the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living because all the hours seem poisoned.
Suffering and testing, trials and difficulties seem to produce lack, not completeness.

But James wants us to look deeper, to hold on longer, and to hang tough in trusting God until what seems terrible yields a greater good. Trials actually fill up what is lacking us, making us not diminished but complete.

Now this is a very difficult message to hear if your pain is acute. When you stub your toe in the dark and the pain is screaming through you, it doesn’t help much for someone to suggest that you consider it a joy. When your world is falling apart, it’s a thin comfort to hear that God will work this together for good. No, in the moment of crisis, this wisdom needs to be inside us already. The time to lay down the tracks that bring the truth about the value of suffering is before the trial comes. That way God’s Holy Spirit can activate what’s inside us, and the peace that passes understanding can arise from the inside out.

But we all know that human nature rarely works for such wise preparation. We fill out our taxes on April 14th. We get our cars inspected on the 31st of the month, if then. And we start eating right after the health complication not before.

So we have to hear James' word to us in the midst of our mistakes, our neglect, our perplexity at circumstances and the complexity of daily life.

Consider it joy my friends when you encounter various trials. Because the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And steadfastness works to make us whole and complete, lacking nothing. Paul said it this way, "...we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope. And hope does not put us to shame because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that was given to us" (Romans 5: 3-5). Suffering creates endurance which creates character which results in a living hope in the God who does not disappoint.

Late last night, only one light was burning in the living room. He scrolled through his favorite sports app, but couldn't keep his mind on it. She was in the bedroom sleeping at last. He was tired, bone-tired. But strangely joyful. Had he ever realized before how much he loved her? Had he ever felt before as he did now, when pressing in on every moment was the awareness of how much he wanted to be with her? Gutting it out hour by hour in all the daily tasks he had to perform, he realized as never before how much he needed her, now when she needed him most. Yes, he was tired, but there was no quit in him. "I will see it through," he said quietly. The demands of love had made him lean and supple of soul. Even when he wept for their time that was slipping like sand through his fingers, he knew he wouldn't trade these days for anything. He switched off the light and felt joy like an inextinguishable flame inside him.

A mother, single again, has learned how to be both homemaker and financier, breadwinner and hearth-tender in her home. She is disciplinarian and nurturer, yard man and decorator, plumber and seamstress. Every day she does more work than one human being can possibly do, and though she is tired she composes her face with the love of her little ones and perseveres. She knows she cannot get sick, can scarcely dream of finding love for herself again, must endure on few touches and even less praise. But she will not fail these children. And in the night God whispers peace, and in the day God lends her strength. And after a dozen grinding years that passed in a blur, she realizes how she has been led from shattered heart through bitterness of soul, to a renewed softness and beauty. She is lovelier now than the untried prettiness of youth. Now she is lit from within with love that did not fail, and beyond hope she counts these days as a joy.

Years ago John Mellencamp wrote a song which reminded us, “Life goes on, long after the thrill of living is gone.” Not many of us have the luxury of star athletes who simply retire when the game we play is no longer fun. No multi-million dollar contracts have padded our accounts and given us the leisure to do whatever we can imagine. Five or six days a week, 48 or 50 weeks a year, work calls and we must go. It doesn’t matter whether or not it’s fun. How you feel in the morning is not the determining factor. The work must be done and you must go.

A man wakes after a restless night to the sound of the alarm. For a moment he doesn’t know what day it is, or if he’s in his own room or on the road again. His heart pounds with the insistence of the ring. He rises and can’t quite straighten all the way up. It will take a half hour before he can stretch, and then ten minutes of pain before he’s flexible enough to engage the battle of the day. He’s too young to retire, too old to be hungry and expectant of much advancement. On the way to his car, he passes his fly fishing rod. In his mind’s eye, the picture flashes of a secret stream in the country, with no one else around, and all thoughts and stresses are pushed away by the concentration needed to keep the line dancing in its hypnotic rhythm. For two seconds he considers calling in and then taking off.

But people are waiting for him. There are conflicts to be resolved, tangles to be smoothed, and customers to satisfy. His pound of flesh is required. They own him from 8 to 6, and demand his blood and sweat every day. Whenever he thinks about tossing his keys on his boss’s desk and shouting, “Forget you all!” he thinks of the little bodies sleeping upstairs as he slips out of the garage. They need him employed. And so he perseveres. He endures the trial, denies himself, slogs it out, and makes it happen. Day after day he has built a character of steadfastness. He can be counted on. He is required. And underneath his exhaustion there runs a stream of satisfaction. He has been there and done that for the sake of those he loves. Consider it all joy my friends when you encounter various trials, including the daily wear and sacrifice of your body for the work required of you.

Life is grinding us down. But God is wearing us out so we will be renewed and refreshed in him alone. The body fails as it ages and there is nothing pretty about it. But in the pain comes a greater dependence on God than we have ever known. Do we dismiss our older people because their bodies appear frail? How foolish can we be! Do we not realize the courage it takes every day to put a frail shell into play in a world as loud, as fast, as dangerous as this? There is a steeliness of character required by the years which we could do well to watch and admire.

Meanwhile how many men and women are living one day at a time, some finding every hour a trial as they try to live without drink, without drug, without pornographic addiction? Every moment demands dependence on God; every day of perseverance in which they lack the poison they crave creates a completeness and wholeness beyond expectation. They are courageously denying what they long for in the moment for a deeper satisfaction.

Yes, all around us are heroes of the wars. Some are veterans of real wars, dealing with images in their minds of things they witnessed too horrible even to speak aloud, except to a very few confidants. How do you live in the “normal” world with these insane pictures in your heard? And yet they do. In the pew next to you are people who are living through desperate days and frightening nights. They are carrying heart-stopping worries and dragging behind heavy chains from the past. Yet they go on, and God sustains them. He loves them so. Jesus saw the people, you remember, that they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd and his heart went out to them in a bursting compassion.

When you leave this room, you will be entering your mission field. In your home, at work, in school, on the ball field, in the stores, at the places you volunteer—wherever you go you will meet people who are undergoing trials and testings of all types.

I don’t suggest that you walk up to them and say, “Wow, your life stinks. I don’t know how you stand it. But the Bible says consider it all a joy. Have a nice day.” But I do urge you to take a closer look at the people who fall within the sphere of your influence. What are they dealing with? What stresses them out? Where are they in pain?

Could you go to them and ask a question that will give you an opportunity to listen, to share their load for a while? Could you be so brave as to ask them, “What good has come out of this ordeal for you?” You might be surprised what they will have to say. Could you ask them, “How have you felt God with you in the midst of this?” Don’t be alarmed if they haven’t felt God very close. They might, you see, feel that God is mad at them. They might not have ever heard about the God who stood among his people and when he saw their helplessness and their suffering felt not anger but heart breaking compassion.

You are his ears now to listen to his little ones. Who on your mission field wants to talk this week? You are his voice now on your mission field. Who needs

a word of assurance or compassion or encouragement? You are his hands in the world. Who is aching for the reassuring touch that tells them they are not alone?

Testing and suffering produce perseverance in our lives, especially when we see that our circumstances come to us from the hand of a God who loves us and is using all things in our lives to make us whole and complete in him. There is joy in suffering if we can see Christ with us and leading us in the midst of it. But don't stop with yourself. There is a world of aching hearts right in your midst. To whom are you called to bring joy and hope this week?