

Count it All Joy

James 1: 2-4

**First Presbyterian Church
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Noah Pourciau**

Good morning church family! When Pastor Gerrit asked me if I would be interested in teaching one Sunday morning, I was filled with excitement, honor, and fear. Before I begin, I want to tell you all that I am acutely aware of the privilege and responsibility I have to speak the truth in grace this morning. I hope that my words will lead you to his and together we will taste and see that the Lord is good.

This morning we are going to wrestle with the concept of suffering as we study James 1:1-4. Before I begin, I want to point out that I am a child on this topic in comparison to many of you. The suffering I have experienced in my short 22 years on this earth has been great, but is small in comparison to the decades of suffering many of you have had to endure. I hope that you will bear with me as I attempt to shed light on what God has for us this morning.

(PRAY) James 1:2-4: 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.

When I first read this passage, I was overwhelmed. I immediately had a plethora of questions about suffering, and when I researched and studied I had even more points that I wanted to make on this massive topic. I tried squeezing them all in in my first. And second. And third draft. But it just wasn't possible. This is such an incredible topic, and although there are many different points to be made, I'm sure you will be glad to hear that I was able to narrow it down to three main questions I want to address. These questions are:

1. Why would a good God allow suffering?
2. Why would we be joyful amidst suffering?
3. What can suffering do to us?

Why would a good God allow suffering?

“I still hear the screams Noah. I see the blood. I feel the fear. I hear the gunshots. When I sleep, I dream of him. Every second of pain is a reminder of the fear in their eyes as they slipped into the night. Noah they were Mothers and Fathers; They were sons and daughters. I watched as husbands called their wives and said I love you for the last time. I saw dead children laying in puddles of blood.” I gritted my teeth and shook with anger as my oldest sister Bonnie Kate spoke to me of the horrors she experienced that dark night in Arora Colorado. She was shot in the knee at the midnight premiere of Batman in a mass shooting July, 19, 2012. She will never run, dance, or jump again.

I was 15 years old the first time I truly became aware of the suffering, darkness, and evil of this world and have wrestled with this difficult reality ever since. How could a good God allow this? What is the point? Why? Why? Why?

I was furious with God for a very long time until I presented my question to one of my high-school teachers in attempts to stump him and justify my hatred towards God. I ask my professor. “How could a good God allow such suffering and evil in this world? Surely if he was good he would create a world where those he loved didn’t have to suffer. Would a parent permit his children to such evils?” He looked at me and said so calmly “I will answer your question when you ask it the right way.” As you can imagine this made me furious, but it made me think. Over the next few days I came up with various ways of presenting my question to him and his response was always the same. Finally, I lost my patience and demanded he explain to me the right way to ask the question. He graciously said to me. “The question is not how could a good and perfect God allow suffering. The question is; How could a good and perfect God allow anything but suffering to those who deserve it.”

Although I was not happy with this question, over time I began to see the false assumptions that I had been making.

My first false assumption was: I don’t deserve to suffer.

When G.K Chesterton was asked to give a response to the question, What is wrong with the world? He responded with a letter that read:

“Dear sirs,
I am.
Sincerely yours,
G.K Chesterton.”

Romans 5:12 reads: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

When we are truly honest with ourselves, we see that we are not deserving of anything but suffering and death. We actively choose to run towards things that brings suffering to ourselves and those around us.

My second false assumption was: If God has a reason for allowing this suffering I deserve to know it.

Have you ever been used? Has someone pretended to be your friend to get to someone else? Has someone pretended to be your friend until they no longer could get what they wanted from you and they dropped you faster than a hot knife could cut through butter.

We often treat God this way.

When we experience suffering we so often try to come up with “reasons” or “things God is teaching us through it” The difficult reality is that most of the time God doesn’t show us why. He doesn’t let us in on what he is doing. I believe part of the reason for this is because we want to love God for what he is “giving us in the moment” what he is “teaching us”. We so often do not love God or anything for who they are. We love things for what we can get from them. When we do this, we not only crush others, but we dehumanize ourselves.

The only way to know that you are serving God for himself alone and not for the things he is giving to you is to be in a position where serving God actually gives you nothing that you can see. We could never love unconditionally the way God loves and become who we were meant to be without suffering and not knowing what God is doing.

God doesn’t always give us a reason why so that we can serve him and love him for who he is and not for what we are using him to gain. We have to learn how to love people for who they are in themselves, and we have to learn how to love God in himself, and the only way to do this is through suffering.

As more time passed I began to see the pride in my assumptions.

Tim Keller revealed to me in his book *The Reason for God*, that If I had a God that was great enough to be angry at for not ridding the world of suffering and evil, I had a God that was great enough to have a good reason for allowing it to continue and not let me know why.

If God is transcendent enough to rid the world of sin, is he not transcendent enough to have a good reason for allowing it that is above my understanding?

Isaiah 55:8-9 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Although suffering began to make sense to me, it still did not seem worth it. I understood why I didn’t understand it, but I was far from content with it, and even farther from being joyful in it. Which leads me to my next point.

Why would we be joyful amidst suffering?

In verse one James tells us to “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,” How is this possible?

“Someone I love died.” Count it all joy.

“I have no true or loyal friends.” Count it all joy.

“They broke up with me.” Count it all joy.

“My family is so unhealthy and broken.” Count it all joy.

“I can’t quit the thing that I know hurts me.” Count it all joy.

“I am treated horribly simply because of what I look like.” Count it all joy.

“I’ve been abused and I’ll never be the same.” Count it all joy.

“I don’t feel you at all God, my life is a mess and I don’t know what to do.” Count it all joy.

Count it all joy?

I looked inward and outward and all I could see was pain and suffering. Sayings such as “God’s got a plan” or “Gods ways are not your ways” or “count it all joy” only made me bitter and angrier. Why was this not good enough for me? Why do

we become so angry with God when things go wrong? Why do we keep allowing the things that we know don't matter in the long run to destroy us?

I believe the answer is simple and reaches all the way back to the garden. We believe Satan's lie that God doesn't really love us. He tells us: "If you give yourself fully and utterly to God he will crush you. You will lose everything 'important'. You won't be happy. You can't trust God. God doesn't really love you!"

I knew in my head that God loved me, but, in my heart of hearts, I didn't believe it.

The reason I can't handle suffering is that I believe the lie of Satan. What we need to handle suffering is proof that God loves us. How do we know that Satan is a liar and God loves us?

We know, because there was another who cried out: why God why? Another who was alone, and beaten, and forsaken. Another who suffered relentlessly without an answer to why. The only innocent sufferer. The only truly forsaken.

Jesus Christ was the only person to serve God fully and for nothing. The only person that God said give everything to me and I will crush you. Satan is a liar because our God did that for us. He loved us just for who we are. He didn't get anything out of it. He had all glory, and he gave it all up and took all of the pain you feel and inflict. All of the suffering you deserve.

That is our proof. And when you know the extent that he loved you, suffering doesn't pull you away from joy, it pushes you deeper into it.

Christ's love revealed to me that my castle was built on sinking sand. The security I had in my family, in my community, in my strength, in my wisdom, was gone. My golden calves melted in the fire of tribulation and I began to see the vanity of my pursuits.

When I put my hope in things, losing them caused me to lose my joy. But when I put my hope in him, losing things pushed me closer to him and to my joy. I tried so hard to find my joy in relationships. I tried so hard to find my joy in work. I tried so hard to find my joy in money, in status, in family, in alcohol. And I was always left wanting. Everything I loved eventually hurt me. The God of family did not withstand suffering. The God of relationships, did not withstand suffering. The God of status did not withstand suffering. No matter how many things I had, none

of them made life worth living when I encountered true suffering. I was looking for God in everything but him.

Chesterton famously said: “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God.”

Suffering showed me that I had been knocking on the wrong doors to find the joy I so desperately needed.

In losing what I thought I could not live without I gained the only thing worth living for. A father, a friend, a God who suffers with me and for me. I only found true joy when I had nothing else but him.

What can suffering do to us?

Suffering is a powerful force that either brings forth life or death. When we suffer without faith we become hardened, bitter, and resentful. We blame others and God. Suffering without Christ causes our innocent desires to become sinful and eventually destructive. When our desires are not met we suffer. And when we suffer without believing that God loves us, hunger becomes gluttony, sexual desire becomes lust, and the desire to have money becomes greed.

It's like we are drowning, and in a panic we drown those around us. Impatiently we breathe in water instead allowing ourselves to be brought to the surface. Because we do not believe God loves us, because we do not believe God will carry us through, we breathe water instead of oxygen. We swim deeper into our source of our pain and we become shells of who we could be.

Although suffering can create a monster in you and lead you to death, it is not the only way. And it is never too late.

James 1:3-4, “because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.”

When we refuse to believe the lie of Satan, when we suffer and hold fast to the fact that our God loves us. When we refuse to breathe the water even though we just need some air. When we suffer with faith, something incredible happens.

You become who you were made to be. You gain a joy that no death, no pain, no loss can take away. You become a person with purpose. You become a part of something so much greater than yourself. You begin to see how much you cost him, and his love for you becomes real and tangible because you got a glimpse of the unmet desires, the pain, the death, the suffering he endured for you. He took the breath of water so that you could get the oxygen. So that you could know joy in all things, and become mature and complete lacking nothing.

Conclusion

We worship a God that allows us to lose what we think we cannot live without so that we may gain the only thing worth living for. (REPEAT)

We worship a God that lost it all that we may have it all.

We worship a God who suffered brutally for us and because of us.

So when we suffer...

may we not become hardened bitter and resentful. May we not shift the blame. May we not believe Satan's lie. May we not run to our idols. May we not choose the path to destruction and death.

But may we become steadfast, joyful, and complete. May we take the blame that we may see his love in taking it from us. May we run to him. May we cling to him. May we trust in him.

He wept for us. He bled for us. He suffered for us. So may we Count it all joy, my brothers, when we meet trials of various kinds, for we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that we may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.