

Sermon 2: James 1:2-4: True Religion in Testing Times

OUTLINE

By thinking right we can attain joy
By steadfastness we can attain maturity

INTRODUCTION

Whenever we use our pain as an excuse to sin we have forgotten the main reason for this life. Too often when life lets us down we think to ourselves that we need a little comfort, a little spoiling, a little joy in our lives so we turn to sin. James reminds us in this opening exhortation of his letter that the goal of our lives is to be holy, or as he puts it in v4, 'perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' James is writing to a group of believers who are not mature and holy in their walk. It has been suggested that James 4:4-10 is the central concern of James' letter as he writes to a what seems to be a backslidden people, 'You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.' The letter has a certain tone as it has more imperatives than any other letter; and it launches straight into exhortations without the usual thanksgivings and blessings you find in other letters. But it is also apparent that James is writing to a hurting people, almost the whole of chapter 1 is concerned with testing and temptation and how we respond to suffering. The commentaries debate about whether the main problem is persecution resulting in financial and social ostracism; or maybe the famine of Acts 11:28 caused widespread economic difficulty. Whatever the troubles, which do seem to include both persecution and general difficulties, these believers were not being faithful under trial. As so often happens out holiness slips when we are going through tough times. The pain can even become the reason we doubt God and give up on our holiness. James is writing to encourage true religion in testing times.

The structure of James' sermon style letter is not as structured as you would find in Paul. James seems to introduce all his big themes in chapter 1, and then circles back to them throughout the letter. Trials; rich and poor; the tongue; worldliness; and true religion are all found in chapter 1 and are developed throughout the letter.

Today we begin where James begins and that is with our trials. v2-4, 'Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' I find that to properly understand these verses it is best to read them backwards. So then we start with James' last thought that the goal of our lives is to be holy. But in order to be holy we have to let steadfastness have its full effect. But in order to achieve steadfastness we need the testing of our faith. And since we are

experiencing the testing of our faith in all kinds of trials, we can have true joy over our trials because the main goal of holiness is possible and being accomplished within us by our Good Father who is directing our steps and who controls our situation.

I will divide these verses up into two points following the two commands that James gives us. Firstly, By thinking right we can attain joy; secondly, By steadfastness we can attain maturity.

By thinking right we can attain true joy

V2, 'Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.' This is certainly a very awkward statement, it sounds like James is saying that we should look at every part of our trials and be joyful for each and every part. The word 'all' can have an intensive not only an inclusive sense. In other words James is saying something like consider trials an opportunity for true joy; or pure joy as the NIV says. James is not saying that every part of what we suffer is to be considered joy. We do not rejoice over the fallen world that we live in; we do not rejoice over the sin that so often causes suffering; we do not rejoice in the pain we or others feel as if pain were some good in itself; the loss of a loved one is not good; getting cancer is not good; losing your job is not good. However, James is saying that no matter how bad it gets, the Christian is still able to count it/consider it joy because of the good God brings out of it.

You will notice that James is writing to believers, he calls them brothers indicating their oneness in the faith. There is a joy that believers alone can have because of their relationship with God. This teaching is not unique to James but taught by Paul, Rom. 5:3, 'Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.' And 1 Peter 1:6-7, 'In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.'

But please take note, the Christian life is not a trial free zone. We are not promised a pain free existence. If Christ Himself, the sinless One had to learn obedience through suffering, how much more we who are sinners.

V3, 'for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.' You will notice the important word 'know'. James appeals to what we know not what we feel. Today we rush to judge a thing good by how it feels or bad by how it feels. In a fallen world where some of our pleasures are destructive and our pains are good for us we have to go on what we know not what we feel. What do we know? We know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. Paul says the same, 'knowing that suffering produces endurance.' The joy we can experience lies in two things, knowing that our suffering is an appointed test by a loving Father; and the potential good of steadfastness that results from the suffering. James is making very terse statements but many things are inferred by them. Firstly, your suffering is not meaningless it is a test. James of course is assuming the worldview of the Bible where an all powerful God is sovereignly ruling over all and who allows certain things to take place for our good. The word test and temptation are the same word in the Greek, some distinguish the difference between them by the outer situation versus the inner temptation to sin; or that God who is sovereign over all wills our holiness through an event

making it a test to improve us compared with the devil who also wills the hardship for us, not out of love but hate and who wills the temptation to destroy us. The case of Job where both God and the devil willed the situation Job was in, God for testing Job, the devil for tempting him. The word testing speaks of refining to find genuine.

Testing can reveal something false that only appeared real until it was put to the test. The parable of the sower shows the seeds sown on stony ground as having an appearance of salvation but when put to the test of persecution, they abandoned the faith proving their faith was not a real saving faith. We welcome this sort of testing which reveals a saving faith which is of great encouragement to us. But there is another form of testing or refining where something is exposed to pressure in order to make it stronger. I recently made my own knife with Shane Minnear. We took a piece of metal and exposed it to the extreme heat of a furnace, then the hammering on an anvil and this process was repeated, once you have cut out the shape of the knife from a flattened piece of steel you then anneal it, making harder in a slow cooling process. It won't hold an edge without this process. Then you still have to take that rough outline and grind away the excess on a grinder, using finer grains of sandpaper removing all the ugly marks from forging it, and then finally you put an edge on it. It is only after all these steps that your original lump of steel is a useful tool. In the same way our pains in the hands of God work together for good. Paul in Romans 8 talks about the sufferings of this life, and all creation groaning, but he also talks about the confidence we can have in a world where everything is falling apart, 8:28, 'And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.' The one setting the temperature for the furnace is a God who has promised to save us; the one yielding the hammer is one who has predestined us in love; the One cutting and grinding away the ugly and useless parts is the One who gave His Son to save us, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things. The unbeliever cannot have this confidence in our trials but we can.

Lets think about that word 'steadfastness.' That word in the Greek literally means 'working under.' It is a word picture for bearing a burden for a long period and can be translated as perseverance/endurance as well. It is interesting that if you wanted to choose a virtue to be the top benefit of suffering, you might be tempted to list love, so why does the Bible repeatedly list perseverance as the important benefit derived from our trials? Perseverance is considered a doorway virtue which leads to all the others. If you have perseverance you will love when things are tough; give when things are tough; forgive when things are unjust; pursue good even in evil times. Perseverance is what is needed to run a marathon. Steadfastness is like the muscle that is produced after constant training where muscle is broken down to develop stronger muscles. In order to attain to the holiness that God calls us to in the fallen world, steadfastness is vital. No steadfastness not holiness, but what James is telling us is that no pain no gain; no trials no steadfastness. Therefore, when the trials do come we see it as opportunity not calamity, we genuinely embrace the situation for the opportunity it gives us to refine ourselves. It enables us to lean into the trial like we do the burn when working out; or the horrible flavour of a healthy smoothie when we are trying to get healthy. Knowing this we consider it/count it joy. This is not the same as grin and bear it pretending it is good when there is no good in it. Nor is it the same as pretending it does not hurt, some think that godliness consists in not registering the pain. No by thinking correctly we can find true and

real joy, a type of contentment not giggling in the midst of trial because we know our Father transforms them into something beneficial not harmful.

By steadfastness we attain maturity

V4, And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' Here is our second exhortation, the first was to consider it all joy because trials produce steadfastness. Having established that there is still another thing that we must do. You have heard it said that trials can make you bitter or better, well here we see that this is because we have to let steadfastness have its full effect. What happens if you leave an alloy of mixed metals in the furnace for too short a time? The impurities will not melt and float to the top to be removed. What happens if you are going for a long run and you get that burn in your thighs running up the first hill and you don't push through, you don't get fitter or thinner. What happens if you are on a diet and you decide to give in at the first feelings of hunger? Your diet will not be of any good. What happens if a Christian is being persecuted and instead of returning good for evil, and forgiving seventy times seven, and as far as it depends upon them being at peace, and praying for those who persecute them, they instead give into revenge, cherish anger and unforgiveness in their hearts, return evil for evil? Well they will not become sanctified, they will not become more like their Saviour, they will not let steadfastness have its full effect and will not become perfect and complete lacking nothing.

How do we not let steadfastness have its way? By giving into sin instead of staying holy; by giving into doubts instead of holding fast to faith; when we get angry at God and criticize Him for making our life hard; when we abandon our prayer lives, or bible reading or attending church and try escapism, indulgence and sin to cheer ourselves up. When we hide our light under a bushel instead of shining it to avoid persecution. There are any number of ways that we can not let steadfastness have its full effect.

Now what does James mean by 'perfect and complete and lacking in nothing.' Perfectionists love this verse because it seems to leave no room but for perfection. It is true that the word used here can mean perfection, but it can also mean mature. Commentators recognize that this word could be speaking of our perfection in heaven, or a maturity of holiness. As believers we are steadfast striving for perfection though we will not reach it in this life, but confident of real progress to maturity that enable genuine spiritual growth. The word 'complete' is an interesting one, it is used to mean without defect when describing a sacrifice, but it is also used to describe something that is whole. In light of the next section which deals with doublemindedness, complete as unified and not doubleminded is likely the meaning in view. James then says that if we are steadfast that we will lack in nothing. What does this mean? That we will be rich? We will be lacking in nothing of what is needed to be able to do God's will in every situation. By steadfastness we will gain the maturity we need to fulfil the main goal of our lives which is not pain free living but holiness.

When times are tough we are tempted to give in, to stop being holy, to stop praying, to question God, to justify sin and many other things. This group of believers is backslidden and James is equipping them to stay true in tough times.

What does this look like for us: maybe you are suffering the loss of a loved one, the grief can come in waves. These waves bring strong temptations to anger,

blame, unforgiveness, self-pity, and doubts about God. Maybe it is loneliness that is crushing you. So temptations to compromise on who to date, sexual purity, self-control, anger at God and many other sins suggest themselves to you. Maybe you are suffering from ill health or the ill health of a loved family member. You are tempted to covet others comfort, the wisdom of God's ways, to complain endlessly, to justify being short with people. We all face any number of difficulties, what difficulties are you facing and how do we apply these verses? James invites us to recognize that you are a sinner that needs trial to produce holiness. The hard times that you would not choose for you, realise that God has chosen them for you. These things that do not feel good, may not be good, but in the hands of God do produce good. Something I have been meditating on while thinking about hard times is how often the sin that we are not aware of on our good days, surfaces on our bad days. All those sins that come so naturally to the surface reveals that we are not yet conformed to Christ; that our knee jerk reaction is still not holiness but sin; that our hearts leap to anger, and blame, and self-pity and doubt as an instinctive first reaction and not prayer, and remembering God's promises, and confessing God's goodness. So take James' advice and see the good that is happening, sin is being exposed, the very things you feel tempted to do are the sins that are being surfaced for you to confess, to mortify and to replace with the fruits of the Spirit. James is wanting us to see that we have an opportunity the angels do not have. They do not have to serve God through difficulty in a fallen world they abide in His presence. They do not have to wrestle with a sinful nature and surrender themselves to God. You and I have this burden and this opportunity to serve God in this unique way. And it is by continuing on this path, while thinking about God and His ways and what He is accomplishing, that we can even transform our grudges into gratitude, and even experience a contented joy not constant complaining. Difficulty is not an excuse to sin but our opportunity to overcome it.