

Sermon on James 1 1(-18)

Introduction

“Life is pain. Anyone who says otherwise is selling something.”

So says the dread pirate Roberts in the Princess Bride.

Life hurts –

difficulty, sickness, grief, loss.

Is that your experience of life?

The last few years have been defined by struggle and hardship.

A pandemic impacts our lives in ways we never expected.

The fear of the coronavirus amplified by the media.

Images of people on ventilators.

Chest Xrays with lungs full of fluid.

Glued to our screens for the 11am update.

Isolated in our homes.

Loss of income.

Struggles with mental health.

Weariness in coping with all the changes.

A continuing drama as COVID still moves through our community.

We're all feeling the trauma and tiredness throughout this trial.

Life is pain.

We face our own person trials.

Declining health.

A loveless marriage.

Grieving a loved one lost –

it might be years since they died
but still, the heartache remains.

Chronic pain and discomfort,

an injury that never seems to heal,
a back that colours our life with pain,
the relentless ring of tinnitus

Family breakdown,

betrayal,
divorce,
a rebellious child

Financial pressures

An increasing cost of living
A mortgage to pay
Crippled by debt
Loss of income

Mental health

Anxiety,
Depression,
Dementia
The memory of abuse.

Struggles with our faith,

Doubts,
Besetting sins,
mocked by friends and work mates,

denied career opportunities because you're a Christian,
feeling marginalised.

Life is pain.

Life hurts.

Tears.

Heartache.

Weeping.

Crying.

Emptiness.

What are we to make of it all?

Today we start the letter of James.

James is concerned about how we live as Christians.

He wrestles with what life should be like for us now that the Lord Jesus has redeemed us.

A simple way we could think of God's work in our lives is in three steps:

First, Justification – we're counted as righteous before God in Christ
we're saved from the punishment of sin.

Second, Sanctification – God's work in us to transform us to be like Christ,
we're being saved from the power of sin.

Third, Glorification – God's work in us will be completed through Christ
we will be saved from the presence of sin.

James is wrestling in his letter with the area of Sanctification.

What does it mean to live as those being transformed by to be like Christ?

We are works in progress, incomplete, unfinished.

We live with the reality of Christ's redemption and the presence of the Spirit in our lives.

Yet at the same time,

we also live with the reality of a broken world and the presence of sin in our lives.

And so James begins with trials.

How do we live in a world where we are beset by trials?

Life is pain, isn't it?

Or is there another way of seeing it?

1. [A letter for Exiles](#)

James puts pen to paper by way of greeting in v1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

James identifies himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus.

It's a term that is used to designate apostles and other leaders in the church.

But which James is it?

James, the son of Zebedee?

James, the son of Alphaeus?

James, Jesus' own brother, leader of the church in Jerusalem?

Most likely, this James is Jesus' brother.

Jesus' brother has now bowed the knee to him,
seeing he is the Lord and promised Messiah.

He now serves him in serving the church.

James writes to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

It's hard to know whether this is a particularly Jewish audience,

Or whether it is more figurative,

and addresses all Christians as the new people of God,
the new twelve tribes.

The apostle Peter uses the term "scattered" of all Christians among the nations.

Whatever the case, the term has the flavour of exile,

living away from home among the nations,
people who don't belong in this world,

but look to a better home, a new world.

It's carries with it a sense of dislocation and longing,

living in a place where they're out of place.

And isn't that us?

We're in the world, but we're not of the world.

We live here, but we don't belong here.

We belong to God's kingdom,

and we feel the rub between his kingdom
and the kingdom of the world.

We feel the brokenness of this world,

and look to a world that is new, complete, our home in Christ.

We're exiles longing to return home.

James writes to us.

Live as those who belong to God.

2. The reality of trials

James begins by talking about trials, v2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...

What?

Consider it pure joy when you face trials?

Seriously?

Happy is not a word that comes to mind when I think of cancer.

Who feels glad when they're treated poorly?

Losing someone to death is not a cheery thought.

Is James expecting us to be some kind of masochists?

No. He isn't.

He's careful about the words he uses.

Trials in themselves don't bring happiness.

That's why he writes.

There are many things that bring pain and heartache.

He talks of trials of many kinds.

There're a whole gamut of difficulties and hardships,
we only scratched the surface in the introduction.

The word "face" in the original language means "fall into".
It's the same word used in the parable of the Good Samaritan,
when robbers fell upon the man.

It carries with it a sense of unexpectedness, of surprise.

Troubles and trials are part of life in this world.

But we never expect them,
they catch us off guard,
they spring upon us unlooked for,
they ambush us with pain and hardship.

And James says,

"Consider it pure joy..."

Why?

"Consider" is a faith word.

It's used in other parts of the Scripture.

Paul writes,

I now consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... (Philippians 3:8)

Peter writes,

Bear in mind, or consider, that our Lord's patience means salvation...

“Consider” is to see ourselves and the world from a different perspective,
A perspective from what we know of God’s character,
through the lens of the gospel of Christ.
And so here, when James says, “Consider it all joy”
it’s to see our own trials from a different perspective,
from a gospel perspective
A perspective that sees “joy” in the trials,
not in the trial themselves,
but because we see God at work
in what is painful and difficult.

3. God’s work in trials

So what is this perspective the gospel gives us on trials?

v2 is only half the sentence so we need to keep reading.

v2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The “because” at the beginning of v3 is giving the reason we count it joy when we fall into trials.

The reason is because God works in trials,

using them to bring about your transformation into the likeness of Christ.

James unpacks how it works.

First, the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

This testing isn't like an exam where we pass or fail.

This testing is like we might test metals, refining and purifying them,

metal that is put into a crucible,

the heat cranked up,

the impurities burning off.

Trials are the crucible for our faith,

refining us, purifying us,

a process that removes the supports of false faith

the things of this world we trust in,

and drives us to Jesus, strengthening our faith in him.

Such sustained testing of our faith brings perseverance –

staying power, steadfastness.

Perseverance is an enduring constancy that clings to Jesus,

and won't let go.

It's to be trained by the trials of life

to consistently, without swerving, trust in Jesus.

And James says – you know this,

You know the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

It's like the runner,

who is tested and tried by his training and hardwork,

to then have the staying power to run a marathon.

It's like the manual labourer

who is tested and tried by his toil and labour
to then be able to consistently produce good work.

It's like the parent

who is tested and tried through tantrums and heartaches
to love their children well despite all the difficulties.

The principle holds for faith,

when our faith is tested and tried through trials and hardships
it produces persevere –

a staying power that sticks with Jesus and doesn't budge.

Second, perseverance results in maturity.

God's work in our lives through the trials we fall into

has a goal that he's moving us towards.

Through the constancy of perseverance we are matured,

we grow into all that is ours in Christ,

to be like Christ,

to know Christ,

to love Christ.

It's like the runner grows in muscle and focus to win the race.

It's like the labourer grows in strength and skill to produce excellent work.

It's like the parent grows in love and wisdom to lead and care for their children.

So we grow in faith and perseverance and so mature, to know Christ and be
Christlike.

We will find in Christ everything that we need to live life for him,

even in the midst of difficulty and hardship.

It's been my privilege to walk with people through the trials of life.

It's been a privilege to see them tested by trials and grow in their relationship with Jesus.

A brother in Christ who suffers motor neurone disease,
his body slowly shutting down and failing him.

He radiates a joy that is startling, overflowing from his confidence in Jesus.

On a Sunday morning, while he still could, he leads the congregation in prayer,
shuffling forward, leaning on his cane,
to then pray prayers that laid hold of heaven
and pressed the reality of God upon us.

A sister in Christ who is grieving.

It's the second time she is going through a child committing suicide.

She sits her face cupped in her hands.

A well-meaning funeral director sits next to her

puts a hand on her shoulder and says, "It's okay if you've lost faith in God."

She lifts her face, streaked with tears, looks squarely at the funeral director,
and says, "I have not lost faith in him for one moment."

Trials aren't pleasant.

Trials aren't happy.

The joy we find in trials isn't in the trial itself.

It's in our God who works through them,

to grow us in faith and perseverance,

to bring us to maturity,

a depth of relationship with Christ,

a character fashioned to be like Christ.

This is where the joy is, this is what causes overflowing gladness,

a clinging to Christ and all he is,

knowing him more.

We can consider trials joy as they drive us into the arms of Jesus,

and mature us to be more like him.

4. Wisdom in Trials

But who of us faces trials well?

It's easy to feel overwhelmed, discouraged, anxious.

We struggle to trust God in midst of it.

We can be hamstrung by our own emotional reaction.

We can find ourselves blaming God rather than trusting him.

We lack what we need to persevere, to fix our eyes on Jesus.

So James writes,

v5

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.

I don't know about you,

but when it comes praying when I face trial,
my gut reaction is to ask God to get rid of it, take it away,
and we can see that in other parts of Scripture like in the Psalms
or when Paul asks God to take away his thorn in the flesh.

But here James talks about wisdom,
if you lack wisdom, then ask God.

What does it mean to have wisdom?

To have wisdom means to know the right way to live
and then to live that right way.

Asking God for wisdom in the midst of trials
is to ask him to work in you to live the right way,
to respond to difficult circumstances with Christlikeness,
to navigate hardships walking in faith with eyes fixed on Jesus.

It's seeing God's work through our trials
and living in step with what he is doing us.

It's not easy, it's hard, it's painful...

so we pray for wisdom
so we can hold the line, stay the course
and live in a way that pleases him, even in the midst of trial.

The very basis of this prayer is the character of God.

He is generous.

He is eager to give you what you need.

He isn't some miser, reluctant to give you what he has.

No, God pours out his goodness upon us.

And he doesn't hold your faults against you.

He doesn't say, "You don't deserve it."

He doesn't withhold his generosity because we're not good enough.

No, he answers our prayers on the basis of his love to us in Jesus.

In Jesus we see his generosity

when he gives himself to us through the death of his Son upon the cross.

In Jesus we see he forgives us

when he dies taking the punishment for our sin, not holding it against us.

We pray on the basis of God's generosity and forgiveness displayed Christ.

Because he's generous and forgiving to us in Christ,

he will continue to be generous and forgiving to us,

and pour out upon us his wisdom in great measure when we ask.

And so when we pray, it must be with faith,

trusting in the generosity and forgiveness of God.

v6-8

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

James says calls us to faith and warns us not to doubt.

Doubt, here in this context, questions God's generosity and forgiveness.

It's the person who prays for wisdom,

but then when he rises from his knees,

he takes his eyes off Jesus

and is pummelled and pushed around by the circumstances of life,

like a wave is blown and tossed about by the wind,

a surging, shifting sea changing from one moment to the next.

To doubt, is to be a divided person,

he wavers between seeing God's gracious rule in Christ

and the brutal dominance of the circumstances of his life,

he's undecided about whether God works in him

or the meaningless struggles of life will have their way in the end.

If we're not trusting in the Lord and his grace towards us,

we can't expect to receive from him.

It's like putting your hands out to receive a present,

but then snatching them away before they can give it to you.

James has brought us back to the place he started – faith.

It's faith that sets our course through trials

faith that God is at work through our hardships

faith that God is bringing us to maturity, Christlikeness

faith that grows to know God more

faith in the God who is generous and forgiving,

faith that looks to Jesus, God giving himself to us.

Life is Pain?

“Life is pain. Anyone who says otherwise is selling something.”

That’s where we started this morning.

But to say, “Life is pain” reduces life its hardships and trials.

It’s to concede that the brokenness of this world wins out over us.

But James gives us another perspective.

Life is joy.

Not because it isn’t painful –

because it is, life can downright hurt, really hurt.

Life is joy

because we can look with faith to a generous and forgiving God.

Life is joy

because he works in our trials to grow us to maturity

to know the risen Christ,

and become more like him.

Life is joy

because we live it by faith in the Son of God who loves us,

each day is an opportunity to know him and enjoy his love.

Life is joy

because meaningless hardships now have purpose in God

to live life with him knowing he works for our good.

So when trials fall upon you, what defines your life?

Life is pain?

You can't see passed the trials and hardships of life.

Or life is joy?

You have confidence in the God who in his generosity,
gave his Son to forgive our sins.

Life is pain or life is joy.

It's faith in Jesus Christ that makes the difference.

Will you cling to him in faith no matter what happens?