

“TURNING TRIALS INTO TRIUMPHS.”

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Scripture Text: James 1:2-12

Introduction.

As we begin to make our way through another book of the Bible this morning let me remind you of some of the benefits of preaching this way. A pastor who just preaches topics or jumps around to favorite or popular texts has the temptation or danger of just preaching what he likes or what interests or appeals to him, or just what he thinks his congregation wants to hear. It has the danger of being a human or self-centered undertaking. It has the danger of turning to technic or gimmicks or entertainment to tickle the ears.

Preaching through books of the Bible in a verse-by-verse manner forces us to hear what God wants to say to the church and makes us increasingly to think God's thoughts after him. Preaching expositionally, as this is called, lets the Holy Spirit guide His Word to each heart according to each of our needs.

Preaching expositionally lets the Scripture be the main point, and lets God speak through His inspired Word. It seeks to be less about me and more about God. And preaching in this way gives you the tools to understand God's Word and study and apply it for yourself.

Brothers and sisters, of all the things people try to come up with to make a church healthy, the one thing many miss, is the expositional preaching of the Word of God. If we get this right everything else will follow behind.

The Letter of James.

Last week I introduced us to this letter of James and to the writer and the audience. This letter was written not by James the apostle, but James the half-brother of Jesus, who became the pastor of the Jerusalem Church. He wrote to the Jews who over the centuries had been scattered throughout the Middle East, Asia Minor and Europe.

I said James is a unique book in the NT. It's probably the first book written in the NT. It's called the Proverbs of the NT. It's a lively book, an intensely practical book that calls for action. Remember over half the verses in James have imperatives, commands to do or not do something. James is not a hard book to understand, it's a hard book to put into practice. The central theme of James is maturity, spiritual maturity.

Chapter one of James serves as a kind of table of contents for the rest of his short letter. Everything in chapter one gets repeated in greater detail in the next four chapters.

James hits the ground running. The second verse starts with an imperative and jumps right into the serious issue of suffering and what to make of it. I said somewhere recently that the issue of suffering is one of the most important issues for a Christian to get figured out. Jesus said in this life we would have affliction, so it's crucial to have a Biblical understanding of suffering and how to deal with it.

The problem with the health and wealth gospel or prosperity theology or the Word of Faith movement as proclaimed by Norman Vincent Peale, Oral Roberts, Robert Schuller, Kenneth Hagan, John Hagee and Joel Olsteen and countless others is it's a false gospel and teaches a lie about the Bible and suffering. "If you are suffering you lack faith, because the King's kids should be rich and successful and healthy." It is an abusive heresy that preys on people and makes an idol of health and wealth and destroys people's faith when they can't measure up to the standard set by the preacher.

One of the tragedies of the prosperity gospel is that it robs believers of experiencing God's sufficient grace and strength made perfect in weakness (II Corinthians 12:9-10). Let's look at how God doesn't make trials go away but turns trials into triumphs.

Count – A Joyful Attitude (1:2)

Count various trials as joy. Who among us finds joy in adversity or hardship? Do you know anyone who does this? In fact, is this really possible?

And even if it is possible, why count trials all joy? Why consider trials a source of joy? Because that shows a mature understanding of what's going on. When we realize our faith is being tested and proved and improved, that God is at work, there can be joy. Where God is, there is joy.

In the immortal words of G.K. Chesterton, "The serious business of heaven is joy." Where God is at work there is cause for joy. Where the Holy Spirit is there is the fruit of joy.

The first exhortation from the pen of James is to accept trials with a joyful frame of mind because we know that something deeply spiritual and God-centered is going on, namely the testing of our faith which will lead to a crown of life promised by God.

When we encounter troubles and trials, setbacks and roadblocks we need to train ourselves to not evaluate them in the light of what the world says or what some well-meaning friends may say (remember Job's friends) or what some TV preachers say, but to evaluate them in the light of what God's Word says and in the light of what God is doing in us and for us.

As one pastor put it:

"Our values determine our evaluations. If we value comfort more than character, then trials will upset us. If we value the material and physical more than the spiritual, we will not be able to

count it all joy! If we live only for the present and forget about the future, the trials will make us bitter, not better” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Mature*, p. 33).

What is this not saying?

It’s not saying pain is easy or even pleasant. It’s not saying we should enjoy our trial or that our trials are joy. Pain is real and suffering is miserable. Jesus said, “I am troubled and Father, save me from this hour.” James is calling us to have a Biblical and Christian understanding of the source and purpose of trials. When I see things from the perspective of God’s goodness and grace then I can consider them with a settled joy. We grieve, yet not as those without hope or joy. We fix our joy on what is unseen, not on what is seen.

We have to draw attention to two little words in this verse, ***when and various***.

It says when, not if. A pain free life is not a guarantee. A pain free life is not a right. A pain free life is not even to be desired.

Various (many) trials. What does that mean? One trial won’t do it; one kind of trial won’t do it. One pill won’t cure all that ails us. It will take a whole wide variety of trials to heal pride, greed, lust, jealousy, self-seeking, selfishness, impatience, laziness, gluttony, worldliness, and a whole host of other sins and idols that beset us and are buried in our hearts.

Victory over these enemies of the soul will not come in one skirmish but in repeated testings. The trials must keep coming because there is much to cure.

Count it as joy. Count them up and add them to the income side. When you run the mental audit of your life, put the trials on in the profit column.

This is how a person can rejoice in sorrow and be joyful in trial or tribulation, in adversity and distress. With the Holy Spirit’s help we can rise above our troubles knowing God loves His children and He is at work.

Job 13:15 Though he slay me, I will hope in him.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
19 God, the Lord, is my strength.

Know – An Understanding Mind (1:3)

If we know the outcome to be sweet and good and worthwhile, then we can have a different attitude in the process. If we see the ***spiritual*** value, we see the ***supreme*** value.

If we know we are tested to bring out the best, then we will be more patient. Immature people are impatient people. We “learn patience in the school of suffering” (Calvin).

Romans 5:3-5 we rejoice in our sufferings, *knowing* that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Hebrews 10:34-36 you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you *knew* that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

Your joy is not groundless, it's not just something you talk yourself into, it's knowledgeable, it's reasonable, it's thought out. It comes from knowing that there is something purposeful going on. Do you know this in your knower?

It grows out of a deep awareness that though on the outside what's happening may appear random or sudden or even dark and evil, it must belong to the providential purposes of our sovereign and good and loving God.

Let me say it this strongly, suffering is proof God loves us. Those He loves He disciplines, tests, proves, improves, prunes, and prepares for heaven and all of it a display of His glory and power and love.

I 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 ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Knowing this about suffering and about how God is in the midst of suffering leads us to surrender.

Let – A Surrendered Will (1:4, 9-12)

Let steadfastness have its full effect. Let means submit, surrender, yield to. Full effect means not just once or twice but over the very long haul. Fully not partially or occasionally.

Galatians 6:9 Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

Do grow weary, don't give up, don't wear out, until you are perfect, meaning mature, complete, lacking in nothing. Perseverance and endurance and fortitude and patience and courage produce maturity.

What are your trials that are leading to perseverance, steadfastness, endurance? Are they economic, financial, relational, career, job, domestic pressures or disappointment, kids, irritants, sickness, weakness?

Let them have their full and good effect because you are confident in knowing God is working for His glory and your good. And this is cause for joy. And there is one more piece.

Ask – A Believing Heart (1:5-8)

To ask God is the first act of wisdom. In order to count trials a friend and not a foe, in order to know that trials are testing and improving our faith, in order to submit to the painful pruning processes, we will need wisdom from the Lord.

Whatever is beyond our understanding, we should ask for wisdom from the Lord through Scripture by the Holy Spirit. We need right understanding and we can't get that anywhere but from God.

The Lord is ready and willing to send relief, but He wants us to ask. Knock and you will find. But the relief may come in the form of a reason for the pain and not of a removal of pain.

God's comfort to us in a difficult season may not come in a change of circumstances, but in a change of heart and attitude.

I know a man who shared with me that his accident and subsequent injuries and chronic pain have made him much more sympathetic to his wife's suffering and pain and to others.

He felt like this was the real wisdom and insight of the Lord concerning their situation. I thought to myself it was a real sign of spiritual maturity.

The God we ask wisdom from is constantly listening, constantly hearing, constantly answering, constantly giving grace and mercy and wisdom. Wisdom leads to knowledge which leads to surrendering which leads to joy.

Application and conclusion.

Who is able to have a joyful attitude in every trial? Let's be patient with ourselves and with each other as we grow in this grace and become more spiritually mature with each test and trial. And let's especially be careful not to judge others too harshly or boast of our own progress in this matter of joy. God will not have us proud.

To the world a Christian is a strange creature. To be joyful in tribulation, to sing in prison cells, to give praise and glory to God while being martyred, to count the loss of all earthly things and

benefits as nothing compared to having Christ, to look forward more to heaven than earth. To the world a Christian is a riddle, a paradox, and often a fool.

II Corinthians 4:7-9 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Defeated yet triumphant; sorrowful yet rejoicing in the surpassing goodness of God and in the light of the glory that is yet to come.

Isaiah 43:1-3 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.
3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Pray: Lord, give us wisdom to understand our suffering, our difficulty, give us wisdom to learn from it what you want to teach us. Give us wisdom to accept your teaching, your discipline, your good purposes. Give us wisdom to grow in our understanding of you and your will and ways and wisdom to understand how you are a work in our lives and to what end.