



# Central Peninsula Church

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Steve Aurell  
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## When Life Gets Tough

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Opening our arms to every new day is an act of faith. Isn't that true? Even when we feel the most optimistic, our confidence can be shattered by events beyond our control. A morning that begins with a cheerful whistle can be derailed by the negative attitude of a spouse who gets up on the wrong side of the bed. A much anticipated vacation can be cut short by a broken leg, a stolen wallet, or the death of a loved one back home. Even a pleasant Sunday morning worship service can be ruined by the cold response of a friend sitting in an adjacent row. None of us escapes the heartache of living in a fallen world. To live is to know pain. As newborns, our cries are the first indication that life has arrived. And throughout the remainder of our days our experience confirms for us that few things are more consistent or universal.

Pain flows like lava beneath the crust of our daily lives. It is greedy, meanly debilitating and, ultimately, the price each of us pays for being alive. And yet, pain can also be a great teacher if we learn to attend to its voice. But most often our response is to silence it or run from it like a plague. We come to view pain as an enemy; like some sinister invader that must be extinguished at all cost. But silencing pain without considering its source is like disconnecting the alarm to avoid the news that our house is indeed on fire. Once regarded in this way pain loses its awesome power to instruct us about God's plan and the limits He imposes for our protection and care. Truly pain is the gift nobody wants. It humbles the proud, softens the stubborn and melts the hardest of hearts. Silently and relentlessly, it wins battles deep within the soul. By staying, it refuses to be ignored. By hurting, it reduces us to anguish. And it is at this point of anguish that we either submit and learn, and thereby develop maturity and character or resist and become embittered as people. Now, it would be difficult for us to find, either in Scripture or history, a person whom God used greatly until He allowed them to be hurt deeply. So the question for us today is - how can we best utilize the suffering in our experience? What perspectives can we rely on when life gets tough? Well, James helps us here in the first few verses of his epistle. Turn with me to the book of James.

James sets the context in verse 1, "**James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.**" Now it is not clear from the letter itself who the author is except that his name is James. Most scholars agree that James was the son of Joseph and Mary, the half-brother of Jesus. And he is writing "**to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.**" These were Christian Jews who were scattered because of persecution. This was a suffering community, one that was consistently being hounded and threatened as a result of their faith. They were being uprooted, driven from their homes and shops. Their children were being mocked and turned away from Jewish schools. They had no place to go and nowhere to turn - rejected by the Jews on one side, despised by the Gentiles on

the other. Can you imagine? Life for these people was tough! There is no other word for it. And it's into these circumstances that James introduces his letter with the word "**greetings.**" Now, "greetings" is a really poor translation here. The Greek word means "rejoice!" or "be satisfied!". It would be like saying "cheer up!" or "leap for joy!". What a strange way to address these people who were suffering enormous heartache and pain. It's certainly not a term I would choose to use. How could they rejoice when their entire world was being turned upside down? James doesn't provide a complete explanation but he does offer them three simple truths to help them gain perspective on their suffering. James writes, "**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**"

The first point is in verse 2 - suffering is inevitable. James writes, "**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.**" Notice that James does not say "if" but "when" you encounter trials. So, if you are the kind of person who is particularly attracted to drama or crisis, this is good news. Each day has enough of its own. We don't even have to look for it. Life is tough for everyone, without exception. By using the word "encounter" James has in mind the image of falling into something. It is the same word Luke used of the man who "fell among thieves," implying that we can find ourselves in the midst of trials suddenly and unexpectedly.

I found an example of this recently, taken from a Florida newspaper. A man was working on his motorcycle one day. And as he was revving the engine the motorcycle somehow slipped into gear and the man, who was still holding onto the handlebars, was dragged through a glass patio door and onto the floor inside the house. The wife, when she heard the ruckus, ran into the room, and found her husband lying there, cut and bleeding, with the motorcycle next to him and the patio door shattered. So she went to the phone and dialed 911. The ambulance arrived and took the husband to the hospital where he was treated for minor cuts and a bruised ego, I might add. The wife who had stayed at home to clean up the mess, up righted the motorcycle and pushed it outside. Seeing that gas had spilled on the floor, she gathered some paper towels, blotted up the gas, and threw them in the toilet. Meanwhile, her husband was released to come home. When he arrived, he looked at the shattered patio door, the damage to his motorcycle and became depressed. So he went to the bathroom, sat on the toilet and smoked a cigarette. After he finished the cigarette, he flipped it between his legs into the toilet bowl while still seated. The wife, who was now in the kitchen, heard this loud explosion. She ran into the bathroom and found her husband lying on the floor. He had been blown through the shower door; his trousers ripped off and he had second degree burns on his most sensitive parts. The wife again ran to the phone and called for another

ambulance. The same crew was dispatched and the wife met them at the street. While the paramedics loaded her husband on the stretcher and began carrying him to the street one of them asked the wife what had happened. When she told them they started laughing so hard, one of them tipped the stretcher and dumped the husband out. He fell down the remaining steps and broke his arm. Now that's a tough day! You think you had it bad! As the great 60's prophet Bob Dylan sang, "And a hard rain is gonna fall." Not only does it fall, but James says it falls in different sizes and shapes, lengths and depths. The word "various" here means diversified or multi-colored. And the point is: we all suffer in different ways, but everyone suffers in some way. You might say we have a well rounded portfolio in this regard.

How important it is that we gain a true perspective on our suffering. This is so critical when so many of our responses are conditioned by the culture around us. Many of us are convinced that God intends to help us overcome adversity - "we are more than conquerors." And we are. But this belief can be watered down like cheap perfume when we presume there is a way to completely eradicate our pain, if only we find the right combination of prayer and action. And the assumption is that pain "ought" to be relieved. And if it isn't, then we tend to believe we're doing something wrong. You see, the problem is not really with our experience but with our expectations. We've been fooled into thinking that pleasure means "right" and pain means "wrong" and that furthermore we can make the "wrong" go away if we have the "right" information or technique. But this is not what the Scripture teaches. Everyone who lives in this world suffers. We cannot factor pain out of our experience. And, as God's own children, we're certainly not exempt. This is not to say that the Christian life is an endless grind - not at all. There is enormous joy and peace in Christ. But we should also expect suffering and sorrow as our traveling companions. They tend to show up at the most inopportune times - in our workplace, our schools, our families and even church. And because most pain can't be erased by the simple decision to pick up a bottle of aspirin, it follows that we must accept criticism and rejection, frustration and disappointment, physical and emotional pain as part of the landscape. It's wired into our very calling as Christians. In his first letter, the Apostle Peter writes, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow." Jesus, Himself, assured His disciples they would face persecution. In fact, it's been my observation that the more we choose to lay our lives down for the Lord, the more intense the trials become. What's that about? Well, suffering is not something we can escape or an elective we can afford to ignore. And James's first statement is, "Don't be surprised when it comes."

The second point is in verse 3 - suffering is purposeful. James write, "**consider it all joy, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.**" So pain is productive. In God's sight there is no such thing as wasted pain. I'm sure that's encouraging! Now, let me just say here that I am not the one who walks around saying, "All right! What a great opportunity for growth," when I see trials headed my way.

But when I consider it - when it's thought through with a sober mind - I trust there is a silver lining in it, somewhere. What the enemy intends for our destruction, God works for the good. And it's in knowing this that we can experience His joy, one that is not contingent upon our circumstances. The key word here is "knowing." It carries the idea of understanding something fully and experientially, up close and in person. So suffering, according to James, accomplishes God's purposes in our lives.

Some years ago I went through this strange season. God was pulling and stretching me like silly putty and I was, quite frankly, having a hard time staying present. That ever happen to you? My mind kept drifting and mulling over various scenarios that would help maintain the illusion that I was in control, as if that were possible. On this particular day I was driving down 101 and noticed that my gas tank was below empty. So I took the first off ramp and barely limped into a gas station before my truck coughed its last. "Thank you, Lord!" I filled the tank, got back into the truck, and just as I was starting to pull away the attendant came running out of the station screaming. And I remember thinking, "What in the world is this guy screaming for?" Just then I heard this loud crash behind me. I stopped, got out of the truck and to my embarrassment saw that I had forgotten to take the gas hose out of my vehicle before I pulled away from the pump. The hose had snapped, gas was going everywhere and the pump was looking like a crinkled Pepsi can. And I can remember saying to myself, "Why me, Lord?" Since then, I've had to acknowledge that my natural response to unnatural circum-stances is to ask "Why me? God, why did you let this happen?" Or "God, can't you just help me out here, get my finances straightened out or fix my marriage once and for all?" And I'm always shocked that God never answers when I ask the questions in this way. So I remained confused about the gas station fiasco for a lot of years. In fact, I never told a soul; I was too embarrassed. Until one day, Mark Dobrin walked into my office and he had this confused, blank stare on his face. When I asked him if he was okay he said, "You'll never believe what I just did! I was getting gas at the Chevron station over here and..." well, you know the rest of the story! So God had uniquely qualified me. I fully under-stood what His purpose was for that day, to empathize with Mark in his confusion. Isn't that great! You see, in God's economy there is no wasted pain. But to enter into it requires a whole new set of questions like: What are you trying to teach me? What issues in my heart are you trying to raise? What are you asking me to let go of? What are Your purposes, Lord?

God uses suffering to produce in us a quality of endurance. This is what James is saying. This term suggests the capacity to remain under pressure without collapsing, to hang in there no matter what the cost. It's a quality of inner strength and resiliency - like an old oak tree with strong limbs and deep, secure roots. People like this are products of suffering. Their seasoning never comes naturally, but only as God tests their metal against the elements over a period of time. I think we all long to have this quality as a predominant mark of our character. But are we willing to pay the price?

Some of you may have watched "Shackleton's Voyage of Endurance," which aired on the Public Broadcasting Station a few months back. My wife and I were so impressed with the documentary that we bought the video. Sir Ernest Shackleton wanted to be the first person to cross the Antarctic. He departed from the island of South Georgia on December of 1914, in his ship *Endurance* - named after his family motto "By Endurance We

Conquer.” Slowly the *Endurance* battled her way south. But while deep in the pack of the Weddell Sea the ship was beset by ice. She would never again break free. They were alone, 1,000 miles from civilization, trapped in the ice-covered seas of the Antarctic. “Frozen,” as one man put it, “like an almond in the middle of a chocolate bar.” 28 men fought unceasingly to save their ship from the onslaught of the ice, to no avail. Confronted with the approach of winter and the coldest climate on earth, they were about to be pushed to the limits of human endurance.

Shackleton knew that anyone trapped in this hostile region would be stalked by starvation, insanity and death. And for him, the reality of their plight was terribly clear. With no chance of rescue it was up to him to help his men endure, for nothing can crush a man as to see his dreams crumble to dust. “Though we have been compelled to abandon ship,” he wrote, “which is crushed beyond all hope, we are alive and equipped for the task before us. I pray, God, I can manage to get the whole party to civilization.” Shackleton’s words echo those penned by the Apostle Paul when he wrote, “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing.” Although his dream to cross the Antarctic had died, it did not break him. He simply adapted. “And so if I can’t cross the continent,” he wrote, “I’m going to bring all my men back alive.” It was his version of the old saying, “snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.”

After 23 weeks of camping on ice, the crew went to sea in three salvaged lifeboats. Soaked to the bone and suffering from dysentery, they rowed for a week until they reached Elephant Island, a small godforsaken peak of frozen rock with a few penguins and seals for food. Over time, Shackleton realized that, if he and his men stayed there, they had little hope of survival. In his journal he wrote, “privation and exposure have left their mark, and the health and mental condition of my men are causing me serious anxiety. A boat journey in search of relief is necessary. That conclusion has been forced upon me.” Shackleton’s plan was to sail 800 miles in a 22 foot lifeboat, back to South Georgia where the voyage of *Endurance* began. So he and five others set off. And despite running into a hurricane and 30 foot waves, the men made it back alive. To get a sense of the wonder of it all, it would be the navigational equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack. But what impresses me - more than their skill as navigators or the obvious presence of God’s hand or even the fact that God sent an albatross to fly alongside the boat through the last leg of the journey - was the eternal optimism of this band of castaways. One of them wrote, “when I relieved McCarthy at the helm, the seas pouring down our necks, I felt like swearing and he informed me with a cheerful grin, ‘It’s a fine day, Sir.’” Shackleton himself mentioned McCarthy, that he didn’t have the skills of a navigator, but he kept their spirits up. Shackleton also shared a special bond with officer Tom Crean. “One of the memories that comes to me from those days,” he wrote, “is of Crean singing at the tiller. He always sang while he was steering, but nobody ever discovered what the song was.” He couldn’t carry a tune! But it was Shackleton, more than any other, who kept these men from despairing. One of them wrote in his diary, “However bad things were, he somehow inspired us with the feeling that things would be better.” As the gale force winds pounded the boat, Shackleton watched over each man with pastoral care. He reckoned that when men are at their limits they have to be nursed along.

So after 17 days at sea, the six men stumbled ashore where they could rest. But not for long. The boat had landed on the

wrong side of South Georgia. The whaling stations were on the opposite coast. This left only one alternative: to traverse the island to the closest station. Shackleton knew the risks only too well. No man had ever penetrated a mile from the coast of South Georgia. The whalers regarded the country as inaccessible. But Shackleton, along with two of the other men, trekked without a break for 36 hours over glacier-clad mountains and finally arrived at the whaling station in Stromness. When the haggard, bearded Shackleton told the station manager who he was, the man broke down and wept. Seventeen months had passed since he had watched Shackleton and his men vanish into the black waters of the Antarctic.

But there were still three men waiting for him on the other side of the island. So they got a whaler to fetch them. Shackleton’s energy then turned back toward rescuing the men stranded on Elephant Island. And he could not, would not, rest until he succeeded. After four failed attempts, he finally reached the island 4 months after he had left there. As Shackleton rowed toward the island from the main ship he recorded: “We saw tiny black figures hurry to the beach and wave signals to us. As I came nearer I called out, ‘Are you all well?’ and one of them answered, ‘We are all well, boss.’” At great cost all 28 men headed home at last. Many years later, the son of one of the survivors made this remark about his father’s strange silence regarding this experience: “It was almost as if it never happened. And that’s probably because my father always believed that without having been there, without having experienced, without having suffered and endured, that it would be very difficult for anybody to understand.” This is James’s point exactly. And though few of us will ever face such an ordeal, still in the midst of our own storms the principle applies - God increases our ability to endure through trials. But we will never know this unless we’ve weathered them.

Well, we began this morning by looking at the undeniable reality of suffering in our lives. James says it’s unavoidable so don’t be surprised when it comes. Then we looked at God’s purpose in suffering. And James tells us that through suffering God creates in us an eternal quality of endurance, one that cannot be produced any other way. Now, in verse 4, we see James’s third and final point: Suffering provides an opportunity to either accept or reject God’s plan to mature us as people. He writes, **“and let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing.”**

Look at the process here. What begins with trials and suffering increases endurance. Then, as we allow endurance to have its intended effect we grow into full maturity; becoming seasoned in character. That’s what it means to be “perfect” and “complete.” God’s design and desire is to mature us into people who are able to face any situation. This is what James is saying. And there is only one way He can get us there - through the route of suffering. Suffering will either drive us to God or it will drive us to despair. It will make us bitter or better.

Now, when God looks at our world He sees all the things we try to hide: the brokenness in our lives, the futility we experience as we try and find fulfillment in everything but Him. He sees the painful consequences we reap from the

choices we make: choices to avoid and deny the truth, choices to pursue selfish goals rather than His will for us, choices to harbor bitterness rather than seek forgiveness. He sees all the pockets of pride and self-reliance within our hearts, where we are trusting in our abilities and not upon Him. And He understands that so much of the suffering we experience is a result of what we are as fallen people. He could easily say, "They made their bed, let them lie in it." But He doesn't. Instead God moves to bring those areas into conformity with His character. And He does this by bearing pressure upon them. The purpose of the pressure is to drive us to our knees where we can acknowledge our poverty and trust His resources rather than our own. Let me ask you - is there an area of your life where you feel confident about your spiritual strength? Perhaps you consider yourself a loving, giving, servant of other people. Do you know what God will do? He will bring you face to face with the most difficult, irascible and obnoxious person you have ever met. And you will discover how impossible it is to love and serve that person in your own strength. All your natural kindness will desert you. Your thoughts and attitudes about that person will horrify you. You see what's happening? God is putting His finger on an area that is not being lived out in faith. Or perhaps there is defensiveness, or jealousy, or unforgiveness in your heart. God will bring something into your life that will serve to irritate and expose that weakness. He will press in until you place your burdens on Him.

The Christian life was never meant to be lived out in our own strength. Sometimes in the midst of our battles our focus becomes misdirected. We tend to focus on how we can gain strength rather than accept the limitations of our humanity. So if we look at our lives in terms of what we can control and how we can gain strength through our own resources then we have good reason to fear. But when our perspective shifts and the question becomes not "what can we do?" but "what can He do through us?" are we then able to tap into His resources for our lives. His strength is then available in the midst of our weakness; His joy in the midst of our sorrow. And over time, the Lord will refine, strengthen and mature us at that place of weakness and root out everything that is inconsistent with His character.

The only thing that stops the process is our stubborn refusal to yield. We can resist God's work by fleeing from the pressure He allows. Or we can sabotage the process by complaining or wallowing in self-pity over the pain we experience. We stop short. Dig in our heels. We give way to bitterness or resentment and shout, "Why me? This is so unfair!" and thereby miss the beauty of God's plan. Let me explain it another way - the Lord wants to make us vintage wine. So He takes the grape and squeezes it between His fingers. And if we become unyielding and resist His fingers, two things happen. First, our suffering increases and secondly, we position ourselves in a way that makes it difficult, not impossible, for God to accomplish His work in us. Now, if we choose to become pliable underneath His hand, God will make us Cabernet Sauvignon. The problem is we don't like the fingers that God

uses. Do you know that the people who are squeezing you right now, the circumstance that are pressing in, are the fingers of God? They are simply extensions of the hand of God. God is behind those fingers. And so James is saying, "let the process have its way - trust in it - so you can become fully mature and adequate, lacking in nothing." C.S. Lewis wrote, "That is why Jesus warned people to 'count the cost' before entering into relationship with Him. 'Make no mistake,' He says, 'if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Whatever suffering it may cost you, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest until my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased. This I can and will do. But I will do nothing less.' Yet - and, this is the other and equally important side of it - this Helper who will, in the long run, be satisfied with nothing less than absolute perfection, will also be delighted with the first, feeble, stumbling efforts we make. Every father is well pleased at the baby's first attempt to walk. On the one hand, God's demand for perfection need not discourage us, even in our present failures. Each time we fall He picks us up again. And He knows perfectly well that our own efforts will never bring us anywhere near perfection. On the other hand, we must realize from the outset that the goal towards which He is beginning to guide us is absolute perfection; and no power in the whole universe can prevent Him from taking us to that goal."

Now, consider how difficult it would be to mature as men and women of faith if life was easy: If there were no temptations, how could we strive to be better as people? If there were no difficulties, how could we ever learn to be courageous? If there were no walls to push against, how could we develop strength? If there were no sparring partners, how could we become skilled as fighters? If there was no suffering, where would our compassion come from, our tears? If there was no sorrow, how could we ever know joy? If our lives didn't cost anything, how then could they be worth anything? It is in the midst of pain and not the exclusion of it that we most intently experience God's hand molding us into people of faith and character. In one of his last journal entries shortly before his death, Ernest Shackleton reflected on his voyage of endurance. This is what he had to say. "We had pierced the veneer of outside things. We had suffered, starved and triumphed, groveled down, yet grasped the glory, grown bigger in the bigness of the whole. We had seen God in all His splendors, heard the text that nature renders. We had reached the naked souls of man."

Are you in a tough season? Don't be surprised - trials and heartache are as perennial as the grass and not necessarily an indication that something is wrong with the way you are living your life. This is not to say that our choices don't matter. They certainly do. When we choose to make destructive choices, God deals with us like a loving father disciplines a child. But ultimately we are His workmanship. And He has staked His name on perfecting the work He Himself initiated. In this light, our sufferings are marks of authenticity - through them we learn obedience. And in them God conforms us into the likeness of His Son. So hang in there. God would not call you into a tough season without providing the resources necessary to endure it.

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