

Recently, we finished a series on spiritual formation, where we talked a lot about spiritual practices or disciplines. It strikes me that we choose disciplines like prayer, fasting, and service. These are disciplines we choose, and they're not easy. It's not easy to set aside time to pray. It's not easy to go without food or something else. It's not easy to carve out time to serve others.

And yet, as hard as those disciplines are, they're not as hard as the spiritual disciplines we don't choose. Two weeks ago, we looked at the life of Joseph. Joseph didn't choose to be sold by his own brothers like a piece of meat to a band of Midianite traders. He didn't choose to be falsely accused of coming on to Potiphar's wife. He didn't choose to get thrown into prison. No! The spiritual discipline of suffering was chosen for Joseph.

Maybe you never thought of suffering as a spiritual discipline, but it may help to think of it that way. Think about your own life. You can be in a marriage that's grown unhealthy. It's not what you had in mind when you said, "I do." You might face a serious health challenge. Maybe you have a child with special needs. You love that child to no end, but you see a hard road ahead for them, and nothing you do seems to help. Maybe it's facing the reality that each month, you're going deeper into debt.

Whatever it is, it's entered your life like an unwelcome intruder. You didn't ask for it, and you don't want it. If you could, you'd remove it. But it's there. And it's painful, and it's messing with your life. You want to trust God, but you don't get what He's doing. You don't see how this could be part of His good and loving purpose for you.

There are different ways you could deal with this. One way is to rebel against it; to fight it; to do everything in your power to get it out of your life. But sometimes that's just not possible, and so instead you deal with it by becoming resentful. You get mad at God or anyone who might have a hand in bringing this impossible situation into your life. But maybe that doesn't get you anywhere, and so you opt for resignation. You realize you're powerless to change the situation, so you just give up. You stop praying. There's no joy, no hope. Whatever that thing is, it's taken the life right out of you.

In the only New Testament letter written by a man named James, he tells us a better way to respond to the spiritual discipline of suffering, or what he calls trials. And this is so important to James that immediately after introducing himself and greeting his readers, he jumps headfirst into this difficult topic.

### **In the midst of trials, rejoice in the maturity they bring**

**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. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4**

Notice he does not say, "Consider it all joy, IF ever you encounter various trials," but rather "WHENEVER you encounter various trials." We will all face trials and the suffering they bring into our lives, and that shouldn't surprise us. Peter said, "*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you*" (1 Peter 4:12). In other words, this is the normal Christian life.

Notice James speaks of "trials of many kinds." Trials come in all shapes and sizes. James doesn't categorize them; they all count. There are inward trials and outward trials. Everything can be going great on the outside, but inwardly we're sinking. There are trials that are monumental, like losing a child or going through a divorce. There are also trials that seem so small in comparison we don't like to mention them in the same breath: a canceled flight causes you to miss an important meeting, your water heater goes out so you have to go a day without hot water, premature hair loss, or worse yet, greying! There are trials that come just from being human and living in a fallen world, like the fire in Sonoma County. There are trials that come because we're faithful to Jesus, and those that come because we're not.

It doesn't matter what the trials are, big or small, James commands us to count them as grounds for pure joy. The proper response to suffering isn't rebellion, resentment, or resignation, but rather to, "Consider it pure joy." What does that mean? What does that look like? Does it mean we sadistically enjoy suffering? Does it mean we just pretend to be happy, wiping a Christian smile on our face while we're dying inside? Does it mean we try to conjure up an emotion of joy? It's none of these things. Pure joy isn't so much a feeling but a settled contentment; a deep, steady, unadulterated, thankful trust in God in every situation.

To "Consider it pure joy..." means you make a deliberate choice to see your trials and suffering as a reason to rejoice, not because you like them, but because you believe something about them. The suffering itself isn't joyful, but the product is. James offers two things we should know trials will produce in our lives, and they both have to do with our spiritual formation.

First, “the testing of our faith produces perseverance.” Trials test our faith in such a way that it’s refined, purified, and strengthened. Faith isn’t sheltering against difficulties, but trust in the midst of them. This testing produces perseverance or endurance. The Greek word is *hupomone*. Barclay wrote this about *hupomone*,

**“It’s not the patience which can sit down and bow its head and let things descend upon it and passively endure until the storm is past... It’s the spirit which can bear things, not simply with resignation, but with blazing hope; it’s not the spirit which sits statically enduring in the one place, but the spirit which bears things because it knows these things are leading to a goal of glory; it’s not the patience which grimly waits for the end, but the patience which radiantly hopes for the dawn.”**

The only way we acquire that quality is through suffering.

Second, we should count our trials as grounds for joy because they lead to maturity and wholeness. He says, *“Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* The ultimate goal isn’t perseverance but Christlikeness. But notice we must “let perseverance finish its work.” There’s the rub. We often don’t let perseverance finish its work. We get in the way. How do we do that? It’s all those things I mentioned earlier. We get angry and fight back. We give way to resentment and bitterness. We shout, “why me?” or “this isn’t fair.” Or we just give up and resign ourselves to a life of misery.

So really what James is saying here is suffering is never for nothing. God uses our suffering to form us. Randy Alcorn says this:

**“Mountain climbers could save time and energy if they reached the summit in a helicopter, but their ultimate purpose is conquest, not efficiency. Sure, they want to reach a goal, but they desire to do it by testing and deepening their character, discipline, and resolve. God could create scientists, mathematicians, athletes, and musicians. He doesn’t. He creates children who take on those roles over a long process. God doesn’t make us fully Christlike the moment we’re born again. He conforms us to the image of Christ gradually. In our spiritual lives, as in our professional lives, and in sports and hobbies, we improve and excel by handling failure and learning from it. Only in cultivating discipline, endurance, and patience do we find satisfaction and reward. And those qualities are most developed through some form of suffering.”**

You see, suffering is never for nothing. But James doesn’t stop there. He’s a realist. He knows in the midst of trials and suffering; you can feel lost. You’re willing to accept this as God’s plan; you’re willing to trust God and persevere, but you need help. You need help with being the person God has called you to be. You need help discerning how to navigate through this, and with that, the strength to do it. This is what James addresses next.

## **In the midst of trials, ask God for wisdom**

**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. 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. vv. 5-8**

When James says, “If any of you lacks wisdom,” he assumes you will lack wisdom. But it’s important to get what he means by wisdom. Wisdom is a major theme in James. Wisdom is more than just knowing the right course of action, like should I go to this college or that one? Should I marry this person or not? It’s not about what to do but how to live. In this case, how to live in the midst of trials and suffering. Later in this same letter, James says,

**“The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” James 3:17**

So, here, James is saying, “In the midst of trials, you’ll feel you lack wisdom. You want to be pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, and good fruit, but it’s hard.” I get that! When I’m enduring trials, I’m hard to live with. I’m crabby, impatient, and irritable.

How then can I possibly have true wisdom in my suffering? James says, “Here’s what you do; ask God.” He even uses a verb tense that gives the sense of “ask and keep on asking.” That’s one of the great things about trials — they can drive us to God. Maybe God puts a hard person in your life. This is the most difficult, obnoxious, irascible person you’ve ever met, and God places him squarely in your path; you can’t avoid him. You thought you were a loving, patient, and forgiving person, but not now — you’re fuming, thinking, and saying things you never imagined. What do you do? You come to God and ask for wisdom that’s pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, and good fruit.

And guess what? He’ll give you what you need. James says God “gives generously to all without finding fault.” What kind of giver is God? James says three things. First, God gives generously. The idea is he gives without reservation — he’s just waiting to be asked. Second, he gives “to all.” He’s not picky about who he gives to. He doesn’t keep a list of eligible recipients. Finally, he gives “without finding fault.” This is my favorite. We all know what it’s like to be given something but in a way that puts us down or demeans us. Like, “Here you go. I gave you a brain, now use it.” Or, “I hope you do better with what I give you this time.”

God is so generous! I love what Paul wrote in Romans, *“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (8:32).* He’s

a giver! He's like a giant, filled pitcher tilted towards us, just waiting to pour on us the wisdom we need to navigate through our trials.

But notice James does place a condition on this. He says,

**“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.”**

He's not advocating a kind of “name it and claim it” mentality here. In fact, I don't think he's even talking about believing God will always give you what you ask for, but rather he's talking about whether or not we truly want to do God's will. In other words, he's talking about the sincerity of our request. The word doubt means “to be divided in our mind.” It's the opposite of being single-minded. That's why he describes this person as being “double-minded and unstable in all they do.” You see, the doubter is torn between two allegiances. Remember what Jesus said — you can't serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). It's like how Augustine once prayed, “Lord make me pure, but not now.” How many times have I done this? “Lord, make me loving, but not towards him.” Or, “Lord, help me to be more generous, but not until I build up my nest egg.”

How many of us are like that? In John Bunyan's famous allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the characters is Mr. Facing Both Ways, who attempts the difficult task of facing in both directions at the same time. Many of us, like Mr. Facing-Both-Ways, want some of a little bit of Jesus and a little bit of the world too. We're trying to face both ways.

George Barna, a Christian researcher, says 39 percent of people in churches today are what he calls “notional Christians.” These people consider themselves Christians but haven't made “a personal commitment to Jesus that's still important in their life today.” They want Christ in their life but aren't willing to live in obedience to Him. They want to face both ways.

And the image of a person being rocked back and forth like a cork on a raging sea is perfect. James says the double-minded person is “unstable in all they do” and won't receive anything from the Lord. So, this is an invitation for us to come to God in the midst of our suffering and ask for wisdom, but it's also a warning to examine our hearts. Do I really want to do God's will? Am I double-minded? Is my heart really surrendered to him?

The good news is, though, that once again, we see suffering is never for nothing. It not only produces perseverance and maturity, but it also can move us towards God as we seek him in prayer. It allows us to experience him again and again as a generous giver of just what we need.

**In the midst of trials, recognize your true condition** But James still isn't finished. He goes on and applies this

to two different groups to which he's writing — the poor and the wealthy. It's important to understand in the ancient world there was no middle class. You were either rich or poor. Most people were poor. Ninety percent of the Roman empire lived below what we call the poverty line. Sometimes things were even worse for believers. Many in the churches James wrote to were driven from their homes and ostracized because of their faith. They understood all about trials and suffering.

But there were other believers who were quite well off. Some of them were wealthy landowners who had poor workers in their fields. Now, all of a sudden, they're sitting together in church! Certainly, these wealthy believers would be prone to the double-mindedness James referred to earlier. Jesus talked a lot about that. He warned against the “deceitfulness of wealth” that chokes out the word in our lives (Matt 13:22). He categorically said, “*You cannot serve both God and money*” (Matt 6:24). In Revelation, Jesus said to the believers in one of the churches, “*You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked*” (Rev 3:17). Paul told Timothy, “*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God*” (1Tim 6:17).

So, with all of that in mind, James addresses these two groups.

**Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wildflower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. vv. 9-11**

He starts by addressing the poor. Just as he said earlier to consider it pure joy when we encounter trials, he now says those who are poor should “take pride in their high position.” When he says, “take pride in,” he uses a word that means to boast in, to glory in, to exult, or even rejoice over something. They should exult, not over their poverty, but over their “high position.” What is their high position? Notice he calls them brother and sisters. These poor believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. They're part of God's family, God's beloved children. That's their high position. The poor are really rich. Paul wrote, “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ*” (Rom 8:17). He talked about “the incomparable riches of his grace” (Eph 2:7). Peter wrote, “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession*” (1 Pet 2:9). All of this is the poor believer's high position. And I think we'd all agree when that's all you really have, you can appreciate it more. Again, suffering is never for nothing!

On the other hand, he says the rich should exult in their humiliation, or you might say their “low position.” What does that mean? I believe he's reminding the rich believers they're poor,

wretched sinners who've been saved not by their riches but by the grace of God. The Gospel is the great equalizer or leveler. We all come to Jesus the same way, and that's through humbling ourselves, confessing our sin, and trusting in Christ alone. And, in heaven, that's all that will matter.

I heard a story about a General who sat in a royal court, seated right next to the Court Chaplain. In the course of the meal, the General turned to the Chaplain and asked, "Pastor, in this moment together here, could you tell me something about heaven?" The Chaplain looked at him carefully and said, "Well, yes, I could. The first thing I'd tell you is that in Heaven, you'll not be a General."

That's what James means when he says, "like flowering grass he will pass away." You see, there is a great reversal coming when those who take pride in their riches will be humbled, and those who have nothing but their faith in Christ will be exalted.

I don't think I have to tell you that all of us would be considered rich by the standards of the day when James wrote this. So, let me ask you, what are you boasting in? What are you exulting in? James reminds us how quickly the hot sun and scorching wind can wither grass and destroy flowers.

He says, "so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away." What a haunting line! Does that describe us? What are you pursuing? Sometimes we don't realize the folly of our pursuits until we get older, because old age and death are also equalizers. Some of you remember Lee Iacocca, the legendary carmaker. He wrote this in his autobiography: "Here I am in the twilight years of my life, still wondering what it's all about. I can tell you this: fame and fortune are for the birds."

More recently, as he faced death, Steve Jobs had the same message.

**"Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked."**

Finally, to close this opening section, James reminds us one last time that suffering is never for nothing.

**Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will**

**receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. v. 12**

What a sweet promise to the ones who persevere amidst suffering. Blessing comes to the ones who keep loving Jesus in the midst of trial. A crown of eternal life!

Let me summarize what we've learned. When you're confronted with a spiritual discipline, you didn't choose, when confronted with trials and suffering, how do you respond? Rejoice in the perseverance and maturity suffering produces in your life. Ask God for wisdom to live righteously and single-mindedly in the midst of suffering. Appreciate that whether you're rich or poor, these trials remind us to exult in what really matters in life.

The bottom line is suffering is never for nothing. How does this apply to you today? Do you have the right perspective on your trials? Are you rejoicing in what those trials are producing? Are you letting those trials drive you to God and experience his generosity? As those who've been given much, are you caught up in your worldly pursuits? Are you exulting in what really matters?

I'll leave you with one story. Corrie Ten Boom and her sister, Betsy, were kept in the Nazi concentration camp, Ravensbrück. It was terribly overcrowded and flea-infested. They were able to miraculously smuggle a Bible into the camp, and in that Bible, they'd read that in all things, they were to give thanks and rejoice because God can use anything for good. Betsy decided this meant rejoicing in and thanking God for the fleas. This was too much for Corrie, who said she couldn't do that. Betsy insisted, so Corrie gave in and prayed to God, thanking Him even for the fleas.

Over the next several months a wonderful, but curious thing happened: They found that the guards never entered their barracks. This meant the women weren't assaulted. It also meant they were able to do the unthinkable, which was to hold Bible studies and prayer meetings in the heart of a concentration camp. Through this, countless numbers of women came to faith in Christ. Only at the end did they discover why the guards had left them alone and wouldn't enter into their barracks: It was because of the fleas.

When you're faced with suffering, take a moment, and remember the fleas of Ravensbrück. Suffering, even with fleas, are never for nothing!

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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