

*series: Pure Religion: Wisdom that Works from the Book of James*

For as global as our world has become, it has also grown increasingly individual. There seems to be a push back against the globalization that flattened our broad general understanding of the world. Since the second world war, America has been undergoing a significant shift. Affluence flooded our country, and what resulted was the growth of private space to live in, with the majority of Americans having the means to fill the space. With these two factors, growing living spaces and means to purchase things to fill the space, a consumer revolution was launched. People began to live more on their own, tried to make a life of luxury removed from the previous confines of their own family. This freedom and autonomy gave rise to increased individualism like our world has not known before.

And while this consumer revolution is a newer phenomenon, it has its roots in the Romantic period of the late 18th century. During this stage, intellectuals and artistic elites had been searching for an authentic way of living and expressing themselves. But this is now not a trend for elites only but defines the experience of us all. Couple this expressive individualism with the consumer revolution, and you have a society that is fundamentally organized around our ability to achieve and maintain our own comfort. But yet, with all of our freedoms, with all of our progress, with all of our ability to numb the pain, we can't seem to outrun the trouble that comes our way. We live in a cultural moment that seeks comfort, but we live in a reality that experiences pain. And it is this tension we find utterly disorienting.

We are in the second week of our series entitled, *Pure Religion: Wisdom that Works from the Book of James*.

Let me briefly set up a bit of context for this book. I find the book of James to be a uniquely interesting read among the rest of the New Testament writings. Very little of the book is the presentation of theology, but rather, it is James getting into our everyday business and challenging us to live out our faith. Its content is immensely practical and relentlessly insists on our faith manifesting itself in the way we live life.

It was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. So, wrap your head around that. Anytime I think about Jesus' brothers, I always think about what that moment was like when Jesus, for the first time, told his brothers he was God. However, that encounter went, what we do know is that after the resurrection, James was convinced that Jesus was who he said he was. James then went on to become a leader in the church in Jerusalem. This was the first Christian community ever, and James was its leader. What

we know about this first Christian community was that it quickly fell on tough times during James' 20 years as its leader.

The community was impoverished as a result of the famine, and they faced persecution by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. So James wrote this book, which while short, is densely packed with a profound challenge written to all Christians everywhere. James was heavily influenced by two primary sources that come through in his writings. Jesus' teaching (especially the Sermon on the Mount) and the Book of Proverbs.

We are going to look at James' teaching about how the follower of Jesus responds to suffering and trials. And at the core of James' message is for us to look past the present circumstances and see what awaits us on the other end of trials. For James, that which awaits us at the end of trials will deeply shape how we experience the trial in the midst of it. And it will fundamentally challenge our cultural conception of trials, pushing against our modern sensibilities, which states that only what feels good should be considered a proper thing. So with that in mind, let's read the text in its entirety.

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. 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. 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.**

**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 wild flower. 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. 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. James 1:1-12**

One of the things I just love about the Bible is its ability never to skirt the realities of our world. James is a perfect exemplar of this. Never does the text dance around the harsh realities of the world but notice its insistence in the messy brokenness of our world. I think that sometimes because we are removed from the biblical text in so many ways...ancient book, different cultural context, etc. that we often assume the Bible is some sort of "other-worldly" book. But when you read the Bible you are faced with its raw this-worldliness. Look at verse 2.

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds..."* Notice first that James assumes we all will face trials. He doesn't say, "If you experience trials." He doesn't say that because it is not the reality his readers lived in, and it's not the reality we currently live in. It's not if; it is when.

You may be asking as well, what does James mean by trials? He defines this broadly as well, "trials of many kinds." The focus is on the various external trials or process of testing. Is it a struggle with a child that has gone wayward? Is it a difficult season in your marriage? Is it a diagnosis that just altered the rest of your life? If you are facing any sort of trial, it will fall under what James is speaking about here. And with a stroke of bold realism, James understands the world enough not to skirt the issue; we will face trials.

### **Trials are Inevitable**

The reason I think it is important to note that every kind of trial falls under what James is talking about is because of the first part of this verse, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters..." Now, I hope I am not alone in thinking of this particular command with a bit of reservation. Seriously, James, pure joy? The verse starts off with the imperative, and it is one that certainly has been quite abused over the years. It has been used to crush those facing difficulties. But this is not James' intention; rather, James is speaking about a state of being.

And this is much different than happiness. James is not saying that regardless of circumstance, you should be happy and all smiles. Instead, joy is a state of being that recognizes the deeper work that may be going on in the moment. As one commentator defines Joy, "a settled contentment in every situation or "An unnatural reaction of deep, steady and unadulterated thankful trust in God." This distinction between joy and happiness is a really difficult one for us modern Americans. Much of our lives are built around the constructing and reinforcing of happiness and feeling good. But James counters that posture with this concept of joy as trust.

I want to pause on the idea of the inevitability of trials for one minute. For some of you, this text is not some ethereal discussion; it is your current and painful reality. We recognize that some of you here are facing incredibly difficult and painful realities in your life. For you at this moment, whatever James is going

to say is theology written into your real life. You feel the tension of this text more acutely than others right now. We want you to know that we are praying for you, and we see you. I want to make sure you don't think I am being cavalier in the way I discuss trials and joy. And for the rest of us in the room, because trials are, in fact, inevitable, the storm that is coming is still off on the horizon. The days and seasons of trials are coming for all of us.

This is what makes James and the Bible so compelling to me. The Bible meets us in the world we are in, and is honest and real about our current struggle. The scriptures are clear that we live in the space between the kingdom of God is announced and its full consummation. One day God will right all wrongs and will reconcile all things to himself. But we don't live in that world yet. We live in the light of a broken world, where troubles of many kinds come. And what James is going to do over the rest of this section is to defend the claim that trials are to be considered moments of joy for the follower of Jesus. And he is going to do so by demonstrating two ways that followers of Jesus should view trials.

### **Two Ways Followers of Jesus View Trials**

#### **Trials lead us to maturity**

James doesn't leave us guessing as to why we should consider trials of every kind as joy. In the next verse, he provides the rationale behind his bold claim. There is a way in which trials shape us. In our last series on spiritual formation, you will remember that one of the key ingredients that we are spiritually formed is through life experiences and the way in which these moments function as catalysts for our change. They open us up to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

**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." vv. 2-4**

At first glance, it can be easy to read this and scoff at its idealism, that all trials produce perseverance, but place this conversation into your everyday life experience. How have you grown as a human? Have you not grown through failing and falling? Has growth into maturity not come through the difficult and painful realities of our world?

I have noticed both within myself and with other followers of Jesus that we tend to divorce the way we change in every area of our lives from the way we change in our following of Jesus. In James' economy, trials lead to testing, which leads to perseverance, which leads to maturity and completeness. The perseverance that James speaks of here is not a passive, waiting it out, type, but it is an active holding fast to truth in the midst of trial. "...that you may be mature and complete." James does something fascinating here. The reason we can consider trials as joy is that

it is working in us to bring the testing of our faith, which leads to perseverance, which gives way to maturity. The end of trials is that of maturity.

This concept of Joy in the midst of trials can come across so offensive for us. All of us live life in a competition of "ends." We all have a mixed bag of different visions of the good life that we work towards, be it conscious or unconscious. And the defining characteristic and vision of the good life that we adhere to in our culture is what imminent sociologist, Charles Taylor, called "The Age of Authenticity," or what Robert Bellah called, "Expressive Individualism."

The Age of authenticity has its roots in the late-eighteenth century Romantic movement that basically says each of us has our own way of expressing ourselves and should find whatever way necessary to live into that inherent vision, regardless of what it may be. And in doing so should avoid any restriction that may come from an outside force. Does this sound familiar? Put differently, the Age of Authenticity is the belief that we, as humans, should do whatever feels right to us.

Now, the Christian functions from a different understanding of the human. We recognize that we are not always right in understanding ourselves. We are a mixed bag of good things and not good things, and often we can't tell the difference between them. We realize sin has stained our hearts, and we can deceive ourselves. And because of this, we need it to be worked out of us by the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

So what does this have to do with facing trials and suffering? If we are defined by the Age of Authenticity, that whatever feels right is what we should follow, then trials should be avoided at all costs, because it is an imposition on our true self. It is, therefore, impossible for us to view suffering as having any sort of good because it hinders our ability to achieve the ends of what we believe we are defined by.

But as followers of Jesus, our goal (*telos*) is not expressive individualism, but rather, to be transformed from the inside out into the image of Christ. Because, as Jesus said in John 10:10, he has come to bring life to the fullest. Because of this different *telos*, trials are not fundamentally viewed as impositions upon our goal, but rather, are seen as a catalyst that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, propel us toward our ends. So, this is the first way the followers of Jesus view trials differently.

### **Trials lead us to seek God's wisdom in our need**

So if the first way that we view trials differently helps us to understand their purpose, moving us toward maturity or our *telos* in Christlikeness, the second way we view trials is through the lens of how we get through them. And for James, the answer to that comes through the seeking of wisdom to navigate these trials, not by looking for wisdom inward into how we feel, but in looking to the wisdom of God. Listen to James' words in 1:5

**"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." v. 5**

Trials help me be consciously aware of our need for God. Because, as we understand that trials move us toward maturity, the reality is that most of us are still left with questions. For us in our modern context, to move from an understanding of ourselves as expressive individuals, where truth is within us, to an understanding of our own limitations, we need wisdom from beyond us.

Therefore, our response in the midst of trials should be to turn to God in search of wisdom. For it is God "who gives generously to all," and is the source of true wisdom. In wisdom, we perceive that what may be seen as suffering and misfortune in the present, is something God can use to continually refine our souls. Notice that nowhere is it saying that God is the cause of the suffering and trials. Rather, God is using the harsh reality of a broken world toward his good purposes. But this is probably easier said than done.

**"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. 6-8**

Can I be really honest right now? I wish these two verses weren't in the text. This just seems so heavy-handed. What seems so harsh is that he just said to ask for wisdom, which assumes that we are questioning or uncertain. And then in the next breath, he says, when you ask, don't doubt? This is another one of the texts that are so often used abusively toward people in the midst of pain. Often this can be taught as God didn't answer your prayers because you didn't have enough faith or belief. But this simply isn't true! As one commentator writes,

**"James does not demand that a believer never question what God gives them, lest their faith process null and void. Rather, given the context, he maintains that we should not doubt the character of God as one who gives unflinchingly. To doubt his character can also imply that a person is unwilling to trust God with their life or that they do not believe that he is who he claims to be."**

When I think about this tension between faith and doubt, my mind always goes to Mark 9.

**So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, 'how long has he been like this?' 'From childhood,' he answered. 'It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. 'If you can'? Said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for one who believes.' Immediately the**

**boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' Mark 9:20-24**

How much do you resonate with the father at this moment? Here he is in a tremendous amount of struggle and pain. Certainly, facing a trial that many of us couldn't imagine. And he is wavering in his question of Jesus' ability to heal his son. But at the same time, he has faith that Jesus can heal him or else he would have never brought the boy to Jesus in the first place. And then in one of the most relatable verses in the entire Bible, he declares, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

It's as if he is saying, "I trust you are good, I understand your character and lean into that reality, but there are still parts of me that don't understand! I believe that you've got this under control, but there is a part of me that doesn't!" As humans, we are fragmented people, full of both belief and doubt, confidence and fear, strength and weakness.

**"When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit,' he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.' The Spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, 'He's dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up." - Mark 9:25-27**

For Jesus, that confession, by the father, was enough. The good news is that in that place of tension between belief and doubt, God steps in, and that small mustard seed of faith begins to work. And so, we come to Jesus in the moments of faith and doubt, and we lean into God's presence, continually seeking his wisdom that is beyond what we could consider for ourselves.

The messy reality of our world means we will always wrestle with this tension between belief and doubt. But we must remind ourselves of the goodness of God. We must always lean into the character of God that has been demonstrated to us by Jesus. In this story, Jesus heals the son! The "I believe, but don't believe" was enough for Jesus to work with. Let this encourage you. Because you will face struggle and trials, but God is good. Of course, you struggle. Of course, you doubt. Of course, you question. Life is brutal at times but lean into God's goodness.

The double-minded person is the one who doesn't reach out to God in search of wisdom. The double-minded person is the individual who chooses a different *telos* than that of God's. They are the ones who refuse to recognize their own limitations and seek wisdom internally, failing to see that God's wisdom is what brings us to completion.

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

This is the backward nature of the Kingdom of God. From death comes life. From weakness, we are made strong. From honesty about our doubts, we find faith. And it is this exact reversal of what we would expect that James continues to speak about.

**"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 wild flower. 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**

The "believers in humble circumstances" is an allusion to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that blessed are the poor. It is the reversal of our common understanding of the world. That in our poverty, we are made rich. For James, the follower of Jesus that is in humble circumstances is acutely aware of the work God is doing to form and shape them. They are actively aware of their need for God in ways that the rich are not.

But the rich are easily consumed with their own ability to sustain themselves. They lean into their own ability and ignore their need for God. To illustrate their impending humiliation, James likens them to a wildflower, that appears beautiful and well-kept for a time but eventually fades away and dies. For when the time of trials hit, they will expose the shallow reality of our lives if we are not rooted in the proper *telos*, the proper trajectory of formation toward the image of God. When the scorching heat comes, it will wither the plant. "The rich will fade away even while they go about their business." Don't get trapped in the comparison game. Trials come for all and are experienced by all. As a follower of Jesus, we are not called to hang our head in resignation, but to recognize God will use this time to refine, mature, and bring us to completion. Finally, James reminds us of the hope and joy of trials.

**"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 verse to arrive at after having wrestled through the grimy reality of a broken world that we will endure — blessing to the one who holds to Jesus in the midst of trial. Blessed is the one who admits their tension between belief and unbelief. Because here is the point of the text.

Trials are inevitable but they lead to maturity and life. How quickly we forget the essence of this story. It is from death that we gain life. It is from weakness that we become strong.

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Catalog No.1441-2FC