

Rejoicing in trials \* James 1:1-4, 12

April 22, 2018 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

I'm excited to launch into a brand new series here with you this morning called Faith in action – the message of James. James is a neat little letter tucked in at the back of the Bible and I think that that title really gets to the heart of it. If you asked James himself to summarize his letter, he would probably say this - faith is not really faith unless it impacts the way you live - genuine faith is expressed through action. For five chapters, James works through how to apply faith when it comes to money and knowledge and speech and business decisions - and so, it's no surprise that this letter is very very practical.

We're going to track with James from now until our big anniversary in June, but for this morning, we are going to start with the very topic that James starts with. And it's a big one: how faith responds to trials.

Now that's a topic that's been particularly relevant in the last few weeks, hasn't it? The tragedy in Humboldt Saskatchewan has been on all of our minds I'm sure and if you're like me, you've probably wondered – how do we respond to that? How does my faith in a gracious God shape how I respond? How would I respond to something like that in our community? What do we do with these trials?

And really, we don't have to go all the way out to Saskatchewan for that, do we? You have all faced, to varying degrees, trials and tribulations in the last year, that have probably made you think – oh, so what do I do with this? How does faith in God equip me to handle these trials? How do we respond to trials?

That's the very first question that James takes up, so turn with me to James, chapter 1 and we'll start right off the top in verse 1. James 1 – just behind Hebrews but before Peter and John.

The letter begins: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings (Jam 1:1 NIV).

Let's pause there. Who's James? He's a servant of God and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. So he is someone who is working to see God's Kingdom come. From other places in the Bible, we know that he was a church leader. But there's something special about THIS James, a connection to Jesus that is different from everyone else who wrote the Bible. James is Jesus' brother (half-brother). Mary and Joseph had children after Jesus was born and so Jesus grew up with brother and sisters, he played with them, He learned about God with them and James was one of them. We don't know exactly WHEN James realized that his brother was in fact God, but he did, and when he did, he went on to play a pretty big role in the early church in

Jerusalem. He was a major church leader with pretty significant pastoral authority in traditionally Jewish places.

And so it's not surprising who he writes to here – second half of verse 1 - To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. (Jam 1:1 NIV). He's writing here to Jewish Christians who have been chased out of Jerusalem because of their faith in Jesus. The very first Christians were in fact Jewish – they grew up knowing God's promise of blessing to Abraham and when Jesus appeared, they realized that He was in fact the fulfillment of that promise. But when they committed their lives to following Him, it came at great cost. Their families turned on them; their people kicked them out of their homeland. And so they were scattered amongst the nations, minorities in strange lands.

These are the people that James writes to and it makes sense that his first concern is to help them apply their faith to these trials that they are going through.

And so he writes – verse 2 –

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

3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything...

12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (James 1:2-4, 12 NIV).

Now this is a really powerful pastoral passage so I want to both unpack it and apply to our lives as we go. This is one of those messages that I want you to store up in your heart so that it's there when you run into difficulties.

James starts with a very straightforward command, doesn't he? Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds.

Whenever you face trials – and you WILL face trials – consider it pure joy.

It doesn't matter what shape or size they are, whenever you face trials of many kinds, consider it pure joy.

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

Well, OK... but at this point, I want to break in 'James, are you crazy? You want me to rejoice in trials? Like, you want me to be happy that I lost my job, or got in this car accident?' and James says back – 'No, no, that's not what I said.'

I don't want you to put on a happy face and pretend like nothing's wrong.  
I don't want you to somehow 'enjoy' this trial.  
I'm NOT saying 'don't worry, be happy.'

What I AM saying is this:

Whenever trials arise, think of it as a reason for joy, because God is going to do something in you that you would never experience if you hadn't gone through it.'

We rejoice in the outcome of the trial, not in the trial itself. That's the first point that James is making – we rejoice in the outcome of the trial, not in the trial itself.

Let's be frank here – trials and tragedies are bad. The loss of a loved one is not something to be happy about. Spray painted hate speech on the side of our church is not something to be happy about.

But these trials don't mean that God is sitting on His hands – far from it – these trials are the crucible within which He will work for good. And THAT we can consider pure joy. We don't rejoice in the midst of trials because of what they are, but because of what God does THROUGH them.

David Platt writes: "We need to realize that trials are not joyful in and of themselves, but they are joyful when we realize they are under the authority of a sovereign God who is accomplishing His purposes through them... God is encouraging these believers to embrace trials not so much for what they are but for what God sovereignly accomplishes through them.

Platt, David. Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 137-141). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

What's more, we need to think about what James means by 'consider it pure joy.' Our instinct is to think about joy as an emotion, but when James says it, he's talking about the way we think. That's clear from the language he uses – that word 'consider it' appears like 27 other times in the NT and every time, it means 'think of it in this way.' (Think of someone this way or I thought it necessary to do this or that thing).

James isn't saying 'you should feel happy even when you're struggling' – frankly, as Douglas Moo puts it "people who are enduring trials may not FEEL happy at all" (70) – he is saying, when trials come, we need to make a conscious decision to think of them as reason for joy, knowing that God is about to do something important.'

I think that the NLT puts it well - Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. (Jam 1:2 NLT).

We rejoice in the outcome of trials, not in the trials themselves. Which then begs the question – well, what is the outcome of these trials? What IS God accomplishing through them that is reason to rejoice?

Here it is -

We rejoice in the midst of trials because in the midst of trials, God grows our faith. We rejoice in the growth of our faith.

Look again at verse 2 –

2 Think of it as pure joy whenever you face trials,

3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything

(Jam 1:2-4 NIV).

There's a direct connection there, isn't there, between trials and perseverance and maturity.

Trials lead to perseverance and perseverance leads to maturity.

And that makes sense – when we face trials, we are forced to truly exercise faith – we hope in something that we cannot see. We trust that God really is at work, being the loving and powerful God that He is, really when it doesn't seem like it. We choose to act like the saying found carved into the cellar wall in Cologne Germany where many Jewish people had been hidden - "I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when I cannot feel it. I believe in God even when he is silent."

That steadfast insistence that God is who He says He is, even when circumstances suggest otherwise, produces perseverance. Produces endurance. Produces spiritual toughness. The confidence to tie yourself on to the anchor that is God and weather the storm, no matter what comes.

And you know what that does? It produces maturity. Because you are REALLY exercising faith. It's one thing to believe that 'God is good – all the time' – it's quite another to stand confidently on that truth, even when everything else is bad. But when you do, your faith grows. Mature,

complete, not lacking anything. Really trials are to faith what resistance is to muscle. If I come up against a piece of paper, I'm not going to get any stronger, but if I start lifting weights, I'm going to see growth. That's what trials do – they take our faith and force us to really ACT in faith –showing we REALLY BELIEVE what we believe – and that deepens our faith.

If we let it.

That's the implication of verse 4 – and actually the newer New International Version makes it explicit - 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

We have to actively exercise faith. We live in a culture that wants to tap out of difficulties as quickly as possible – our instinct is 'this is irritating; I'm outta here.' And that can spill over into our Christian lives – we see trials as pointless hardships and we want to do whatever we can to escape from them, or we resent God for letting this happen.

But James is saying, no friends, when the going gets tough, the Christian gets growing. Don't give into despair and spiritually run away – consciously tie yourself to God's anchor and say 'I know God is good, even if circumstances say otherwise.' That's how perseverance has its full effect – when we stand confidently on the truth that God is good and sovereign and loving, we grow in faith.

Trials lead to perseverance and perseverance leads to a mature faith that trusts God no matter what comes. And that growth in faith is reason to rejoice. We rejoice in the growth of our faith.

Now at this point, James goes on to talk about some other issues – namely knowledge and money – but in verse 12, he comes back to the question of trials and actually extends his through line one step further. Look at verse 12 –

12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Trials lead to perseverance – perseverance leads to maturity – and maturity in the face of trials leads to the crown of life.

That's our final point – we rejoice in the crown of life that awaits us.

James knows that this is no easy command that he's putting before us and so he shows us what this looks like from an eternal perspective. In the midst of trials, it's really hard, isn't it? You

might feel pain, can't sleep, don't want to eat but if you let God's sovereign faithfulness shape your response, you know what God calls you?

Blessed.

You are standing the test.

You are putting your faith into action and saying 'no matter how big this problem is, my God is bigger and I will hold on to Him for dear life.' Perseverance is refining your faith and equipping you with everything you need for a life of faith and you know where that leads? To the crown of life. To the promise of eternal glory. God has a crown of eternal life waiting for you.

"Thus we see the firm promise of God to his followers: they do not strive in futility with a vain, blind hope, but instead endure purposefully with the goal of everlasting life with God in sight" (Blomberg, 69).

If you know Jesus as your Saviour, then at this very moment, God is holding on to the crown of glory that you will wear for eternity in the land where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Let that be a shot of adrenaline to your spirit when you need it, knowing that God has a crown of life waiting for you.

We rejoice in the crown of life that awaits us.

What a way to start a letter eh? Not – dear twelve tribes scattered through the nations, I hope you are well, but brothers: rejoice in the midst of trials because they lead to endurance which leads to maturity which leads to eternal life. What an introduction.

Let me try to pull this all together into one thought. Here's what James is saying here:

When trials arise, let them drive you to God, since He's promised you the crown of life.

When trials arise, let them drive you to God, since He's promised you the crown of life.

When trials arise... Trials WILL arise. That's just a reality. James tells us that, Paul told us that, Peter told us that, JESUS told us that. In this life we WILL have troubles.

*33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

*We sent Timothy ... to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. (1Th 3:3 NIV).*

*12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

*(1Pe 4:12-13 NIV).*

But when they DO come, we as believers have a choice – to act as if God were not the sovereign king of the universe who works in all things for good – or to put our faith into action and trust that He IS the Sovereign King working all things for good.

When trials arrive, let them drive you to God. Persevere in the knowledge that God will never abandon you. Press on knowing that God is refining you. And let Him strengthen you and deepen your faith and reliance on Him.

*\*Knowing\** that He has ALREADY promised you the Crown of Life. He is keeping it in heaven for you, where it will never perish, spoil or fade, and He is actively carrying you through this life into the next.

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (1Pe 1:3 NIV).... 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you,

5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

*(1Pe 1:4-5 NIV).*

When trials arise, let them drive you to God, since He's promised you the crown of life.

I have to admit that I was disappointed in the way that Macleans covered the Humboldt Broncos team pastor's message at an early vigil.

Their headline 'Humboldt pastor's anguished speech: 'Where was God?' makes it sound as though this pastor had completely lost his faith and just thrown in the towel in the midst of this tragedy.

But when you read what he actually said, this pastor is actually modelling what it look like for trials to drive us to God.

He did ask 'Where was God' but he answered it like this:

" That question has two answers. God is on His throne and God is with the brokenhearted. ...

I don't claim to understand how this seems like it's in God's control at all, but it is. He's still on the throne, he's still God.

[But] How do we know that God is with us in our suffering? Because Jesus was here, Jesus went through every bit of suffering before we ever did. We have someone that has gone ahead of us and before us into the heavenly realms and who now sits and intercedes on our behalf — we talk to Jesus, we commune with Jesus, we cry out to Jesus. And it's in this time that we need a shepherd who has walked through this valley before, who can guide us.

Oh we need Jesus. We need to hear from God"

(<http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/humboldt-pastors-anguished-speech-where-was-god/>).

When trials arise, let them drive you to God, since He's promised you the crown of life.