

Pastor E.C. Keating
James 1:2-6
“Christian Living For Dummies,”

SUFFERING

The advice in our reading from James is as basic and fundamental as we can get, and yet it is overlooked by even veteran Christians.

How many times are we disappointed because we experience opposition to our faith or because tragedy strikes us in some form or other? How many times do we find ourselves confused, hurt or angry, because life seems to be so unfair? James suggests a different response.

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance (James 1:2-3, NRSV).

The advice is not saying “in the rare event of something going wrong”, but is implying that things will go wrong. Here is a basic fundamental of Christian living that we need to mark for today. In our understanding of our relationship with Jesus we need to appreciate that Christianity is not an insurance against negatives happening to us. Because of our faith (and associated life style changes), research tells us that Christians may be inclined to live a little longer, enjoy better health, and be less inclined to become depressed. But bad things still happen to good people. 1 Peter 4:12 discusses the same issue and tells us to “not be surprised” when things go wrong.

So a basic issue is dealt with here. If we do not have false expectations about our faith, we are less likely to be disappointed.

I hope that James remembered this, for he himself died a violent death, and according to tradition, was thrown off a cliff and clubbed to death.

OVERCOMING PERSECUTION

Troubles? James is not talking about illness or car accidents or our children going off the rails. He more than likely is talking about persecution.

You would think that the Church would have been a welcome social addition to the first century. You would think that the message of peace and reconciliation would be welcomed. But it wasn't. A couple of the Roman emperors, Nero and Domitian were upset with the Christians because they wouldn't take any interest in Caesar worship. At times they also upset the Greeks because of their monotheism. But most of the trouble came from the people most like them, the people with whom they shared a great heritage, the people of the same race as the founder of Christianity, the people of the same race as the writer of the letter. The Jewish religious institutions!

And because it is more than likely that James is an early letter, written before the time of Nero, it is more than likely that the trial of faith will come from the Jewish people.

The people most like us! When you look at the troubles of the early Church they battled with factionalism, heresy, leadership challenges, and power struggles. The people that had a similar faith and common backgrounds - the Jews, were the most hostile towards the early Christians.

And that may well be our experience too. Ministers tell me that they have more stress caused by people from within the fellowship than from forces outside the church. It may well be that the most “persecution” you will face will be from those closest to you, the family, the relatives, the friends who feel a little threatened by your new found faith.

They may be threatened by a perceived superiority, or a feeling that they may lose you, or, as sometimes happens, a fear that you have been taken over by some radical sect.

As you allow your faith to shape your life, and as you follow a lot of the advice found in this letter, those who feel threatened or alienated may work their way through the issues as they realize that the new “you” is an improvement on the old one.

THE REASONS FOR SUFFERING

The most horrible suffering to experience is the type when there doesn't seem to be a reason for it. Not only are you given a maximum of advice, it seems to come from all directions at once. Looking for a reason for the suffering is a confusing experience. As we discovered when we did a series on suffering a couple of years ago, different parts of the Bible say different things at different times.

At one stage the Bible tells us that suffering occurs because of the wickedness in our lives, or in the lives of our ancestors.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me (Deuteronomy 5:9, NRSV)

At times our trust in God is seen as our protection.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. (Psalm 27)

At another stage it is God not so much punishing us, but shaping us, disciplining us so that we learn through the experience.

How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty (Job 5:17, NRSV).

Later on, the Bible says that the righteous ones suffer, but the situation will be reversed in the next life.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes (Revelation 21:1-8).

The great passage from Isaiah tells us that suffering can make things better for other people.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed (Isaiah 53:5, NRSV).

Then in the New Testament, we have that new dimension, that rather than suffering being due to our sin, **it is a sign of our dedication.**

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21, NRSV).

But in James there is another dimension. Suffering strengthens you. It helps you grow up. It toughens you! The word “trial” that is used here has the element of “testing”, as if the experience is going to test and develop your faith.

I know that some of you don’t need to hear this right now, but there is an element in which suffering can change you and change you for the better. A threat to your life can help you value life. Grief can help you understand the grief of others. Childbirth can help you decide never to have another one. Conflict in your marriage can help you be a better counsellor. Stretching a muscle can create pain, but it can also create flexibility.

SUFFERING PRODUCES ENDURANCE

James sees another quality that can come through our trials - the quality of endurance.

It sounds such a passive quality - you put up with the pain and you develop the ability to withstand pain. But it has another shade of meaning. It also means that you develop an ability to see the problem in its context, to even welcome it and to have the power to see it through.

Now let us understand something here. We are probably right in saying that this reflects some persecution of the early Church. There is a myth that has little historical basis that says that persecution is good for the Church. “It toughens up the Christians.” “It sorts out who belongs and who doesn’t.”

However, on the contrary, Church historians would claim that it is very rare to see the Church make giant leaps forward during times of persecution. The Church that has to go underground does not really flourish. It is probably fair to say that the Church has produced some of its greatest heroes during harsh times, but it is also the period where the quality of endurance is greatly needed.

Look at the letter to the Hebrews. Summed up briefly it says, “In the light of adversity, finish strong.”

Peter’s letters can be summed up as, “In the light of adversity, finish strong.”

The Book of Revelation can be summed up as, “In the light of adversity, finish strong.”

Whatever lean time you are going through at the moment, it is probably not a patch on what the early Christians experienced, or on what Christians are experiencing in Nigeria, Indonesia or Egypt right now. However, when the pressure is on, it is so hard to keep your godly focus.

I know - I have been in the spiritual desert too! I know how difficult it can be to pray during times like that, and have been encouraged when people have said that they would do the praying for us.

What is it that destroys faith? It is when you have a faith that does not entertain the possibility of difficulties. Or when you become so immersed in the difficulties you that you cannot see what is going to come from them. When you think that because of the difficulties God is either punishing you or has deserted you.

Here James is saying that there is another possibility. God may be equipping you for something far greater through this trial. It is not his will that you suffer, but it his will that you learn something through it.

HOW TO BE THE OPTIMIST

Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy (James 1:2).

This can present a picture of somebody getting beaten up for their faith and laughing their head off at the same time. This is not James' intention. Do not confuse joy for glee.

1. LOOK AT IT FROM THE BRIGHT SIDE

'Joy' in the Biblical sense is a basic confidence that everything will work out, that something good can come from this experience.

I use this analogy reluctantly, because a male should never trivialize childbirth. But imagine a mother giving birth. The pain is intense. She can either see it is as the end of the world, or as the pathway to something greater. As she goes through this ordeal she is surrounded by a cheer squad, some who have been through it and some who have seen it many times before, who encourage her to persevere, to endure, for they know this pain will lead to greater joy.

In other words, James is saying, "Look at it from the bright side." A few months ago I had some repairs done on an old injury to my wrist. I had to put up with plaster and pain for a few days. I couldn't do my normal exercise. I had to enlist Marge's help to dress. I couldn't swim and I had to explain the plaster hundreds of times.

But nor could I make the bed or mow the lawns. It was exceedingly difficult to wash my cup after coffee and it was impossible to hang out the washing. It wasn't all bad!

A couple of decades ago there began in church circles an emphasis called the "praise movement." It didn't matter what was happening in life, said the leaders of this movement, "Just praise God." Now while that emphasis seemed to deny the reality of grief, it did cause people to look at their predicament and find something positive in the light of the negativity.

The UCLA psychologist, Sonja Lyubomirsky has said In the “Eight Steps towards a More Satisfying Life” she named “Counting your blessings” as the first step to be taken.¹ , She urged people to keep a journal and to list in it the things for which they are thankful.

[¹ Time Magazine, January 17th, 2005, p. 49]

We mentioned persecution before. It would be difficult to find much positive about that, but imagine if we were in the worst of it. We could thank God for the people whose inspiring faith was setting the way. We could thank God for the time in the Churches’ history that after the horrible persecution initiated by Diocletian, Constantine, the next Emperor, actually became a Christian. We could thank God that the Church has never been defeated by persecution. We could thank God that the greatest leaders and heroes of the Church have been produced in times of persecution.

That is what it is to see your trial as the reason for all joy.

2. SEE THE LIMITED DURATION

But it is not only looking for the silver lining in the clouds. Joy means that we know that this trial will not go on forever. I mentioned child birth before. Mothers who have been through it a couple of times know that the details of pain cannot be remembered. I talk to a lot of ministers who go through rough times in their churches. Because I have walked that path I can say to them that the pain does not go on forever.

It is when you are in the midst of it all that you find it hard to lift up your head and see that this will not go on forever. Pain of any type shortens our vision and the horizon seems a long way off. How often have I visited people the day after their operation and found them in a negative, miserable mood, convinced that the pain and immobility will last forever.

That is analogous to the marriage difficulties, adolescent problems, health issues, and relationship difficulties. Understand that pain, whatever it is, shortens your long term vision.

As a contrast, the quality of joy enables us to lift up our heads and see the end in sight. It gives us basic optimism.

3. SEE ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

Because of the attitude of joy we develop not only an optimism that we can overcome, but also the ability to see alternative ways through the problem. It is so easy to hit a brick wall and give up, but note that the quality of joy enables us to keep our head and see alternative ways around the problem.

And joy enables us to see that this experience may be doing something positive to us. The testing, the trial, may be changing us in a positive way that we never thought possible.

One of the things you learn in a gym is that resistance builds strength. You have to lift weights to maximize strength. The trial of resistance actually toughens you!

I have had only a couple of brushes with grief when I lost my parents. They were both elderly and lived rich and fulfilling lives. It is so easy to walk away from people who have lost elderly parents, shrug your shoulders and feel that it was timely for the children and for the parents. But when you go through it yourself you realize that grief is a bit deeper than that. That trial strengthened me, and I hope, made me more understanding

We could go on. You never wanted to have cancer, but that experience changed your life and your outlook. The marriage breakdown may have taught you something about your own limitations. The child that went off the rails may have helped you appreciate that you cannot determine their destiny. The car accident may have helped you appreciate your own mortality. All of these trials help shape who we are.

4. SEE THE STEPS TOWARDS MATURITY.

Note what James says this endurance leads to.

...because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing (1:3-4).

This trial will lead to maturity. It only needs a negative experience or two in life to knock the arrogance out of you, to help you appreciate that you have limitations, to lead you away from allowing your mind and mouth to be dominated by criticism and feelings of superiority. Do you see the tension here? The trial is not intended to destroy you or lead you down the path of emotional defeat and depression. You can meet that trial with the assurance of joy.

But the trial will also round you off as a Christian. It will enable you to have realistic expectations of yourself and of others as far as your faith is concerned. You will know that because you are a Christian you are not bullet proof, and that you share the same dangers and problems with those who are not Christian.

It is when we have unrealistic expectations of the Church, our faith and ourselves that we are the most bitterly disappointed.

During the Vietnam War days a popular, simple, theme song was frequently sung by protest groups: "We shall overcome. We shall overcome some day."

That almost needs to be our theme. Trials, testing times, resistance, are all part of being a Christian. They are shaping us, strengthening, equipping us moulding us, so that we might be even more effective and stronger followers of Christ. And with that attitude of joy, we will overcome.

STUDY 5. NOTES FOR LEADERS

1.
 - a. What has gone wrong for you in recent times?
 - b. Can you see the reasons or did it just happen?
 - c. What has been the impact on you and on others?

3. Read James 1:2-4.

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing (NRSV).

- a. How do you react when you read this verse?
- b. What do you think the various trials would have been?

Probably this was due to some form of persecution. If James is an early writing it would have predated the persecution that was known during Nero's time (62 A.D.). Because of the Jewish nature of the writings (even though lacking in OT quotes) the readers may have been Jewish Christians who were having conflict with the established synagogues. We haven't pursued the issue of persecution in this study because for many Australian Christians it is not a major factor. However there may be some in your group with an overseas background who have experienced some form of persecution. Bring them into the discussion and get them to share their experience

4. The passage implies that we might emerge through suffering as tougher Christians or that suffering might benefit us in some way.
 - a. Do you agree with that? Would you always agree with that?
 - b. Can you think of how suffering has changed you? Has it made you more compassionate or perhaps bitter and angry?
 - c. Have you become more mature? (see verse 4).

a. James implies that suffering leads to endurance and then to maturity. "Maturity" in Greek has the meaning of completeness, like a cheese that has reached its best through the process of aging. The word can also be translated as "perfect."

5. James urges us to count it as all joy.

See the sermon for a development of the thought of the association of "joy" and "suffering." Joy is not synonymous with happiness, but is related to happiness.

- a. Is the idea that "suffering equals joy" a call to masochism? Do you know people who seem to enjoy suffering?
 - b. What do you think James means when he asks us to treat suffering as a cause for joy?
5. Imagine you are talking to somebody about the tough time that they are experiencing. How would you respond to these statements?
 - a. "This seems like the end of everything for me. How could I ever recover?"
 - b. "Where is God in all of this?"
 - c. "This has made me so angry!" (*Often suffering is associated with loss and grief and anger is a frequent reaction*)
 - d. "I have started to wonder if I have done something wrong." (*Am I being punished?*)
 - e. "I can put up with pain but not with people who are a pain."

- f. “Some people seem to get over these things so easily.” (*Refer here to the sermon’s discussion about the impact of joy on the way that we see the issue as either a problem or a challenge*)

6. See Verse 5.

Why do you think this verse follows verse 4? (How are the thoughts connected?)

There are some commentators who do not see connections with the various parts of James and others who see the ongoing thoughts as having obvious links. Here, if the thoughts are linked, James may be implying that the wise person can see suffering in a broader context and not as a challenge to faith.

7. What has verse 6 to do with the issue of suffering?

Suffering can lead us further away from God and cause doubts. 1 Peter 4:12-13 addresses this issue and says that suffering is a part of Christian living. Sometimes the doubts can be caused by false expectations that Christians are excluded from suffering, or it could be that the suffering causes us to be “down”, and as a result emotionally we block out God.

8. Do you find these verses from James a help or hindrance in your understanding about suffering?

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