

Title: James and the Joy of Discipleship

Text: James 1:1-18

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds!”

Wow, he’s got to be kidding, right?

Consider it pure joy to be facing a Covid-19 pandemic?  
Consider it a pure joy to not be able to have family and friends come over for weeks and months?  
Are we supposed to consider it pure joy to be facing a global financial crisis?  
Is it pure joy to have our country polarized by political tensions, racial tensions, religious tensions, sexuality and gender tensions?

Talk about trials of many kinds!

-We’ve all got hyper-tension from trials all around us, don’t we?  
-I don’t know anyone who considers it pure joy to be living in the times we are living in.

So who is this guy James?

-And why is he writing a letter urging Christians to consider it pure joy when trials and tribulations break out in and around them?  
-Is he nuts?

Well, we’re going to be spending some time with James for the rest of this summer.

-And we’re going to listen to what he has to say, and as we go, you can decide for yourself whether he is some kind of nut,  
-or whether he is actually full of wisdom that might just be helpful to us in the current world in which we live.  
-So let’s dive in and see what he has for us today.

1. First, who is this guy James, who is writing the letter?

And it’s a good question, because there are four men in the New Testament by the name of James.

-But this particular James was one of Jesus’ own younger brothers.  
-And probably the oldest of Mary and Joseph’s other children.  
-They are listed in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13:55, and James is listed first.

During Jesus' ministry, his family never quite understood him,  
-and all his brothers and sisters were skeptical about his ministry.

But after his death and resurrection, the Apostle Paul tells us in I Corinthians 15:7, that his brother James was one of the people that Jesus appeared to individually and personally.

And this James became not only a believer, but would grow to become a pillar of the Church,  
-a primary leader of the Hebrew church in Jerusalem.

In the Book of Acts in the NT, when the Hebrew church is wrestling with the question of whether Gentiles can also be included in the churches of Jesus,  
-they call a Council of leaders to meet in Jerusalem, and James is the one whose words of acceptance ultimately carry the day.

So this is Jesus' own brother we will be listening to this summer,  
-and a man who though an early sceptic, became a firm believer and a highly respected leader of Jesus' Church.

2. And to whom who is James writing this letter, urging them to consider it pure joy when facing trials of many kinds?

Well, he says at the outset of the letter that he is writing to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

That was a way of saying that he is writing a general letter to Christians all over the Roman Empire.  
-Christians, and particularly Hebrew Christians, saw themselves as the "new Israel,"  
-and after the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts, they were scattered abroad all over the Empire as they sought to flee the persecution they faced in the "old Israel."

So James is not writing a letter to one particular church in one particular place, but to Christians all over the Empire.  
-To all kinds of Christians who are trying to live out their faith in the hostile Roman Empire of the First Century.

3. And the main reason James writes this letter to his brothers and sisters in Christ living in that hostile world,  
-is to encourage them, and to urge them to persevere and keep growing to maturity in Christ so that they will ultimately receive the crown of life.

He sums up the main point of the whole letter here in chapter 1:12,

*“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord promised to those who love him.”*

My friends, that is what this letter is all about,  
-and it gives us the reason that James can start out the letter with the words, “So consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters when you face trials of many kinds.”

He’s not crazy, and he’s not saying that the trials are in any way joyful in and of themselves.  
-What he is urging Christians in every age and in every place to do,  
-is to see our trials and tribulations from a different perspective.

Our trials, James says quite clearly here in verse 3, are opportunities for growth.  
-It is our trials and tribulations, he says, that produce perseverance in us, and steadfastness.  
-And it is that perseverance which over time produces maturity in us.

And as you read this letter, you’ll see that James is convinced that for God,  
-growing us up to maturity in Christ is what His plan and purpose for us is all about.

Our growth to maturity so that we might attain the crown of life is far more important to God than our comfort and ease.  
-It is far more important than our personal peace and prosperity.

So James says, “Hey, if trials and tribulations are part of the process that produces that maturity and ultimately gains us the crown of life God wants for us, then bring it on!”  
“And count it a joy!” he says.

-Not the trial itself, but the results the trial will produce for us if we persevere.  
-That’s where we find the joy.

“And if any of you lacks the kind of wisdom and insight it takes to see your trials from this different perspective,” James says, “well, ask God for it.  
-Ask God to help you see your life and times more from his

perspective.

- Ask Him to help you gain insight into how your difficult situation right now might be part of his plan for your growth.

You see, God obviously allows these trials to be a part of our lives, even the ones you and I are going through right now.

- The question James is urging us to ask is, what might God want to be forming in us through this time?

And I don't know about you, but in my life, God has consistently used times of trial and unrest and disappointment and even failure to produce humility, and patience in me.

- He's used those times to teach me to stop trusting in myself, and leaning on my own understanding, and instead learn to trust in Him, and lean on His will and His ways and His understanding.
- He's used those times to develop a deeper empathy in me for others, and what they are going through?
- He's also used such times to help me see a variety of worldly idols I have hung onto, and needed to let go of.

You see, times of trial and struggle may not be a joyful experience in themselves at all,

- but James is right, that there is great joy to be found in the graces of God we often experience during those times.

-One of the graces we discover is that God's strength is made perfect in human weakness;

- and that when we are weak, it's the perfect opportunity for God to show us that He is strong.

Maybe you've had glimmers of this even these past few months of facing the trial of the Corona Virus.

- The pandemic and quarantine has thrown all of our lives into disarray.
- What we considered "normal life" has ceased to exist.

But has God shown up for you in various ways?

- Has God made Himself known to you and helped you discover His presence in new ways?
- Has He been teaching you patience, and perseverance, and humility, and even gratitude for what you do have?
- Have you discovered that though the earth's foundations may shake, God is actually a firm foundation on which to stand?

That's why you might count this time of pandemic to be a joy?

- Not because of the pandemic itself, but because of the

opportunity it has provided to discover more of who God is,  
-and to help you mature as a believer in God,  
and in your relationship with God.

Now if that hasn't been happening, and you feel you haven't  
gained any insight or revelation or growth or maturity during  
this trial, then ask for some right now!

I mean it, James says, "If any of you lack this kind of wisdom,  
ask God for it because He gives it generously to all without  
finding fault."

God won't chastise you for not finding anything to rejoice in  
during this past few months,  
-but James is confident that if you ask Him, God will be  
perfectly willing to make this next week a little different  
for you.

He can give you insight this week! He can help you gain a  
new perspective this week. He can empower you to  
persevere and endure and grow and mature.  
-Because God wants you to gain that crown of life.

And my friends, this crown of life James speaks of is not just  
the "pie in the sky after you die."  
-That crown of life is the eternal life Christ offers us even now.  
-When we experience the presence of God in our lives right  
in the midst of our difficulties and trials,  
-that is an experience of gaining the crown of life right  
now.  
-Experiencing God's presence and power IS a taste of that  
eternal life in the here and now.

It's the joy of God's presence with us.  
-It's the comfort of His love all around us.  
-It's the security of knowing we are His sons and daughters,  
and He is our heavenly Father.  
-It's the empowering of His Spirit that enables us to endure  
and persevere.

All of that is part of the "crown of life" that Jesus has won for  
us and gives us as a free gift through his death and  
resurrection.  
-And this is what James is urging upon us in these opening  
verses of his letter.

And it's kind of amazing the way he applies this message  
right off the bat to the issue of poverty and wealth in verses

9-11.

He's still talking about trials and tribulations.

-He isn't changing the subject.

But as an example of facing trials in this new kind of way,

-he speaks of both the trial of poverty, AND the trial of wealth.

Both of them are trials in James' eyes, just in different ways.

-And surprisingly he says that the person in humble circumstances actually has a leg up on the person who is rich!

And why? Well it seems James is saying because the poor person has less to lose!

-He says all of the "stuff of the world" is going to pass away anyway.

-Like the flowers of Spring fade away in the heat of summer, so the rich will fade away too even as they go about their business.

In a sense he is saying, "You can't take it with you, so the poor person who has less to hang onto also has less to lose.

-But the rich person has a lot to hang onto,  
-everything they worked so hard to attain,  
-and it will all ultimately be taken away and lost.

So James says, let the person of humble means take joy in the trial of their lowly estate, for as his brother Jesus said:

-Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God,  
-and blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,  
-and blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted,  
-and blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

But woe to the rich, Jesus said, for they have already received their comfort.

So what should the wealthy and the poor do in their individual circumstances?

James says to all of us, "Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, no matter what kind of trial you face.

But let the rich pay attention to the trials of having wealth, and ask God to give them wisdom in how they face the trials of wealth.

-And let the poor pay attention to the trials of living in humble circumstances,

-and ask God to give them wisdom in how they face the trials of living in want.

In a funny way, James says, "Let them each take pride,  
-not in their position on earth, in what they have or do not have,  
-but let them each take pride in the trials God gives them to face and endure.

-Consider them pure joy, because they are what God has sent your way to help you grow up and to mature.  
-They are what God has sent to refine you, and to produce perseverance in you,  
-and character, and wisdom, and Christ-likeness.

God is not tempting you, James says, to try and trip you up and make you fall.

-Quite the contrary: God is actually sending you every good and perfect gift from heaven so that you might grow and mature and gain the crown of life.

That's the new perspective on the trials we face that James is urging on us as believers in Christ.

-Because he, too, wants us to experience the blessedness of those who when they have stood the test, will receive the crown of life.

So that's what I am urging on all of us for this week to come.

-Ask God today for His wisdom as you approach the world around you in the week to come.

-Ask Him to help you remember the words, "Consider it pure joy."

-And remember as life comes at you this week to look for the ways in which God is forming within you qualities of His Kingdom.

-And take joy in the fact that He is with you, and will never leave you nor forsake you, but will work all things that happen to you together for your good and growth and His glory.

Let's pray.

