

James Series

James: Faith Under Fire

James 1:1-18

Delivered at DHBC on 3 July 2016 by Wesley Parker

Series Introduction

This past June 6th marked the 72nd anniversary of the allied forces' storming of the beaches at Normandy; an event that remains, to this day, the largest seaborne invasion in history, including almost 12,000 aircraft, nearly 7,000 navy vessels, and over 325,000 troops. The scale of that invasion – let alone the planning and strategizing that went into coordinating such an event – is staggering when you look at it.

But one of the things we often fail to consider is that – before a single soldier ever boarded a ship or a single plane ever left the ground on that June morning – weeks and months of training had taken place beforehand in order to prepare. Months before the June 6th invasion - which *depended* entirely upon surprise and, thus, needed to be absolutely top secret - there were even mock invasions on various beaches with similar topography in order to help train the soldiers for the actual invasion. History tells us the American general Dwight Eisenhower even ordered these mock invasions to include live-fire training where heavy artillery on the beaches would actually fire live rounds over the heads of the soldiers as they came up to the beaches in order to help prepare them for the realities they would be facing in the actual invasion.

Yet from these soldiers' first day of boot camp up until the Normandy invasion - commonly referred to as D-Day – the *point* of all this training was not simply to produce a group of trained soldiers. No, first of all their training brought about greater and greater freedom/instinctiveness of action, so that they could carry out their commands as soldiers in the midst of chaos and stress; but then these training exercises also *tested/proved* whether or not the training was actually effective/whether or not those soldiers actually *were* trained, as opposed to just *saying* they were trained.

And as we think about what it means to live the Christian life, the reality is that there can be those same two groups of people, even within the church, viz. those who do have a genuine saving faith/who truly are trained and continue to train themselves to be godly and those who only *say* they do. And as we dig into a new series today going through the book of James, what we're going to hear over and over again through this series, is that the way you know which one you are: if you truly have faith and that you're training is growing that faith, or if you're just *saying* you do, is in your actions/the way that faith expresses itself in your day to day life. James is going to argue that – just like all those soldiers in WWII – we do not train just for the sake of being trained, we are trained for a

purpose; and faith that is truly genuine will always demonstrate itself in our works. Or to put it another way, James is going to say to each and every one of us: don't just tell me you have a true faith in Jesus; show me you do, and I'll believe what you tell me!

If you've been in church for a while or know about Christianity, that can sound l wrong to us at first. Wasn't one of the whole points of the Protestant Reformation that we are saved by faith alone, and not by our works or effort? Absolutely! And yet even those same Reformers like Luther and Calvin confessed that **we *are* saved by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone**; genuine faith that is truly saving will necessarily demonstrate itself in godly action. That is why we've entitled this series through James, **Demonstrated faith**.

Sermon Introduction

And in our very first passage we'll be looking at in our series, James is going to show us that one of God's primary means of testing the reality of our faith and the effectiveness of our training - as well as growing that faith to be even stronger - is through trials and suffering. Which, for our modern, North American, first-world ears makes our passage this morning likely one of the most unpopular passages in the entire bible.

And the reason for that is because – on the whole - we are a suffering-averse nation; where basically every single one of our technological advances – from the microwave oven to stem-cell research - is about one thing alone: to make our lives as easy and suffering-free as humanly possible. And living in a culture like that, we can barely fathom a message like the one James brings to us this morning, viz. that we could actually take joy in our sufferings?! James sounds either like a lunatic or a sadist.

But, here's the thing: James is an interesting guy. On the one hand, he's writing this message from personal experience, being one of the lead elders of the harshly persecuted Jerusalem church, in which he will also go on to be one of the first Christian martyrs. But James also has another qualification that gives credibility to his message: he's also the half brother of Jesus! And why that matters is b/c if anyone had a good reason *not* to have any faith in Jesus whatsoever it was James. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that at one point in His earthly ministry, Jesus' family actually comes to grab Him and shut Him up b/c – as someone rightly said once – when you're brother is going around telling people that He's God, that's what you do, right? You grab him and get him on some strong meds! And yet something happens to James between that time, and Jesus' death and resurrection, where now James can begin this letter to other persecuted believers by saying this in **vs. 1**, look with me there. (**READ vs. 1**). Do you know what James is saying there? He's saying that the same brother that he used to think was crazy, he now worships as God. And we know that because "Christ" isn't Jesus' last name; if you were looking for Jesus in the phone book, you don't head to the letter "C" and start looking for Christ ... Christ is the bible's word for the Messiah; the One God promised all the way back in Gen. 3 that He would send to rescue His people from their slavery to sin and death. Here, James calls his brother Jesus both his Lord, as well as Christ: the Messiah. And in beginning that way, James seems to be telling us right out of the gate, that there is some kind of connection between faith in Jesus and what he's about to say about being able to find joy in trials.

So, as someone who has experienced trials and suffering himself, writing to other people who are experiencing trials and suffering, I think we can give James a minute to plead his case to us today – who also experience trials and suffering – and hear what he has to say.

And the way we'll do that this morning is by looking at our passage in three ways: I want to show you **The reality of suffering, three wrong responses to suffering**, and then finally **the right response to suffering. (x2)**

So, if you have closed your bibles, please open them again to James 1, and we'll dig into this together.

Ok, so let's begin by looking at:

1. The reality of suffering – vss. 2-4, 12

Now, what I love so much about the way James begins here in **vs. 2** is just the honesty with which he writes. Look at what he says. He says we are to consider it pure joy, *when* you face trials of many kinds; not "*if*" you should happen to suffer under a trial someday, or be one of an incredibly small percentage of people who suffer in this life, *when!* And what James just did there was level the playing field for every single one of us. He just said – whether you're a king or a stable boy; the CEO of Microsoft or that dude that gets to walk behind RCMP mounted division parades and clean up after the horses – we will *all* face trials of many kinds. Which means no one is exempt from trials in this life and no one – however rich or poor – gets a free pass from suffering.

And yet, somehow, in the same breath that he tells us we are all going to face suffering and trials, James also tells us we can actually have joy in the midst of them. Now, how can that be? Because of what James says next in **vss. 3-4**. Look with me there. **(READ vss. 3-4)**. So, big picture, what that means is that the reason we can have joy in the midst of trials and suffering is because – in the economy of God – suffering is not random; it has a purpose.

Now, I've never made a secret about the fact that I am no lover of the profession of dentistry. But, as much as I struggle to praise God for those guys, even I have to admit, that the suffering I experience every time I lay back in that chair *does* achieve a good purpose.

But what about all those countless other instances of trial and suffering that seem to have no purpose at all? I guarantee every single one of you has at *least* one example you could share of suffering you have either seen or felt, that you almost don't even like to spend any time thinking about b/c you can't connect the lines in your head between that event and the goodness of God. What about all those times of suffering? Can we have joy there too?

Well, the first thing to say is that joy is not the same thing as happiness. The bible doesn't tell us to be happy about suffering; it says that we are to count it/consider it/think about it as pure joy when we face all these trials. And the reason James says we can do that is because of the purpose they are achieving. Again, **vs. 3**, James says that these trials are intended to bring about perseverance in our faith. Then he goes on in **vs. 4** to say that the "work" that perseverance does in the life of the Christian is that it grows it to full completion

and maturity; so that – as it relates to our faith – we lack nothing. Now obviously, that maturity and completeness is not an instantaneous process, just as it is not in our physical lives growing from infancy to adulthood.

But if you look at **vs. 12** now, you see the end result of this complete, mature faith. Look with me there. (**READ vs. 12**) Now the word James uses here in the Greek for “crown” is *stephanos* which was a crown/prize given to a runner at the end of a race for winning.

Application:

So, let me draw this all together for you now. James is saying the reason we can consider the trials and sufferings of our lives joyful, is because they accomplish two things: a) they grow and strengthen our faith as we persevere underneath them *and* b) they also demonstrate that our faith is genuine to begin with, which means that at the end of this “race” of life, we will truly receive the crown/prize of eternal life from God. So, just like those soldiers training for the Normandy invasion didn’t find having heavy artillery fired at them “happy”; they could see it as an ultimate good b/c it grew their confidence in their ability to carry out their training on the actual day of the invasion, and – as they persevered through it – it demonstrated that they were in fact actually trained, and genuine soldiers in the allied force.

But none of that is to say for a second that any of this is easy or light. Some of you here this morning are deeply suffering under trials of many kinds; as a church, we have all just gone through a year-long season of trial as we waited on God reveal His will for our pastoral leadership. And maybe you hear James say that true faith in trials is going to demonstrate itself in joy and you think, “Oh great! I’m sure not feeling joyful in this trial right now. So you’re saying that means I don’t actually have true faith in God?” To which I would want to be very honest with you and say, “Maybe. Faith that cannot survive the fires of trial and suffering is, by definition, demonstrating itself to not be genuine.” And yet, according to the bible, even a mustard seed of faith that remains is still enough faith to tell a mountain to get up and jump in the ocean!

So it’s very likely that your faith in God is absolutely genuine; it has just been weakened greatly by the severity or the longevity of the trial in the process, and the building process has simply not yet taken effect.

Just as when you are weight training, muscle fibers are microscopically torn and weakened before stimulating the growth/rebuilding process.

But what that also means is that we need to be really careful how we respond in the midst of trials and suffering; that we don’t jump off the train in the middle of the tunnel as it were. So what I want to spend a few minutes now looking briefly at:

2. Three wrong responses to suffering - vs. 5-11, 13-15

One of the ways we know right off the bat that James doesn’t presume any of this will be easy either, is because right after telling us to consider it pure joy when we go through trials, he tell us in **vs. 5** that we’re likely not going to understand the trial as we’re going

through it, and we'll need to ask God for wisdom. Good news here is that he says God is more than willing to give that to us when we ask Him for it. Look at vs. 5 with me. (**READ vs. 5**).

But immediately after saying that, James gives us a caution. Look at **vss. 6-7 (READ vss. 6-7)**. Now I don't know about you, but for the longest time whenever I read vss. 5-6 together I'd always look up from the bible and go, "...huh? How can you tell me to ask for wisdom when I'm doubting, but then the very next verse tell me that if I'm doubting You, I shouldn't expect to get anything from You? Which is it?"

Well, the key here is in being able to discern the difference between coming to God like the man with the demon-possessed son in Mark 9 who says, "I do believe; help my unbelief!" and coming to God with hollow words that *say* you trust Him when the reality is you've already decided in your heart that God can't/won't help you at all. The first response is simply genuine faith expressing fear/doubt; the second is just doubt pretending to have faith. God says He will absolutely honor the first response; the second, He says, "Why even bother to ask, if you've already decided that I can't help you?"

Application:

1.

So, the first wrong response to suffering is to put on a show of faith instead of just coming honestly to God with where you're at.

Look now at **vss. 9-10 (READ vss. 9-10)**. The second wrong response to suffering that James shows us here now is with comparing our sufferings with the sufferings of others. Remember, James is writing this in the context of talking about joy in trials. So, what James is saying here is: if you're suffering as someone who's poor, don't look at the rich guy, assume he's got it easier than you b/c of his riches. And then he's saying to the rich guy who's suffering: don't look at the poor guy and assume that, with a simpler life, he's got it easier than you.

And the reason is: God is accomplishing in your life what He needs to accomplish in *you* through that trial, not in anyone else. But when you're always looking around you and comparing your sufferings with the sufferings of others, you can end up growing bitter and angry towards God; stalling and elongating the process of growth that might otherwise not have needed to take so long.

2.

And I can't even tell you how many times I've had this wrong response to trials in my life.

Not too long ago when I had tried for over three years to get work as a firefighter, I remember growing angry at God, and even bitter towards others, when I would hear about other friends of mine getting hired. I'd be like, "What! That kid lives at home with his parents and doesn't have a family to support like I do! Why on earth would you let *him* get on with the fire department and not me?" And it absolutely hindered my faith and slowed its growth at times when I responded that way.

Remember, James says in **vs. 4** Perseverance must finish its work in *you!* So let God prove your faith and grow you in the ways He knows *you* need it; and let Him worry about what He needs to prove and grow in others.

The last wrong response to suffering is in **vss. 13-15**; look with me there. (**READ vss. 13-15**). And we've actually talked about this already not too long ago. But the wrong response to suffering we see here is in mistaking the trials we're going through as the cause of our sinning, as opposed to being the simply context in which we experience temptations to sin. And James – and God – are both quick to lovingly point out that the cause of both our temptations to sin, as well as our actual sinning in the midst of trials, is no one but ourselves; that we don't get to blame God in the least when we face-plant in the midst of a trial He's taking us through.

3.

The thing to understand is that James points out these wrong responses to suffering b/c they are common reactions, and he doesn't want us to fall into those potholes along the path. As I said, yes, these wrong reactions to suffering *could* mean we did not have true faith to begin with; particularly the first one. But what is *much* more likely is that the reason you are not able to see your trials with hopeful joy at what they are accomplishing, is because your faith has not yet persevered enough to the point that you can do so, **which is the very purpose the present trial you are in is helping you to achieve.**

Ok, so if those are some of the wrong responses to trials and suffering, let's look finally at:

3. The right response to suffering – vss. 16-18

In the very same context of everything James just said about trials and suffering in our lives, James concludes this section of his letter this way in **vss. 16 -18**; look with me there. (**READ vss. 16-18**).

Did you hear that? "Don't be deceived!" Don't be fooled/tricked. The testing of our faith by trials of many kinds is not God's judgment of you nor is He punishing you. If you are a child of God through faith alone in the Son of God, *any* judgment and punishment was already fully absorbed and paid for on the cross when Jesus died in your place; that at *no* point has God ever regretted saving you, or been like, "Wow! I sure didn't see *that* behavior coming! Salvation = denied! So sorry this didn't work out for you; just leave your pass-key at the front desk on the way out."

And one of the big reasons you can know that, is b/c you didn't choose to be saved by God and now you're on some kind of trial pass to see how it works out; **vs. 18** says *God* chose to give us new birth through the word of truth (which I think is referring both to the message of the gospel as well as Jesus Himself who is the divine

Logos/the Word made flesh). So *who* chose to save us? *He chose!* And if God is the One who chose to save us, and He is perfect in all He does, that means He didn't make a mistake when He saved you.

And when that really sinks down from your head into your heart, and you know just how loved and secure you are in Jesus, only then will you see that – rather than doubting, comparing or blaming - the right response to our suffering in trials is to see them as what **vs. 17** calls “good and perfect gifts” coming down to us from our heavenly Father.

That in the testing of our faith and the opportunities it provides to persevere and grow more and more mature and complete in our faith, that – rather than punishing us – our good, unchanging Father is giving us the very thing we need in order to accomplish that goal.

The reality is, most of us already know from our own life experiences, that it often takes days/weeks/even years of distance in order to have enough perspective to see the good of something that was hard/sad/infuriating to go through in the moment. Any of you who have kids/work with kids have had numerous times already where you had to make a hard/necessary call, but your kids was losing it on you, and you were like, “...OH! Wow! Ok, I *totally* get now what my parents were talking about!”

Really hard thing is: God makes no promise whatsoever that we will have that moment of understanding in this life; and for most things, we will likely need the perspective of heaven one day to ever fully see just how good the gifts of our loving Father were to us. But what we *do* have here, at least, is a very gracious “peek” into that future understanding, as God speaks through His servant James here and reminds us that He truly is a good Father; that He chose us in love and that all His gifts are good – even the ones that are hard to accept and understand right now – because they are achieving His perfect will in us day by day.

Conclusion

Writing to a different congregation suffering under very similar persecution, the apostle Peter writes words that sound eerily similar to James' in our passage, in 1 Peter 4. He says, “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.*” In John 15:20 Jesus tells His disciples plainly, “*Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also.*” In Acts 14, we read about the apostle Paul strengthening the disciples in the towns he had preached in, and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. How did they encourage them to do this? By telling them, “*We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.*”

Are you beginning to see a pattern? And, yet, some of you may say, “Yeah, I’m seeing a pattern and it looks terrible! Why on earth would anyone choose Christianity knowing coming in that it’s going to include all this suffering and trial?” To which I would want to ask, “So, you believe that people who don’t follow Jesus don’t suffer, and experience trials as

well?" Because when you zoom out and look at the big picture, you have to admit that we *all* suffer; we *all* experience trials of many kinds. The hope of this passage for the Christian is simply that we can have joy in those trials because we know that they actually have purpose/actually achieving something far greater for us.

And the reason we know that is true is because we follow a Saviour who also suffered greatly, in fact, who suffered in ways well beyond His physical suffering even, that we could never fathom; a Saviour who, actually, was *not* rescued, but gave up His very life in order to redeem our lives; and His suffering has made all the difference for us now for eternity.

Five years before he died, American General Dwight D. Eisenhower (who later went on to serve two terms as president of the United States) returned to the scene of the D-Day invasion at Omaha beach; the only time he ever made that journey after the war. And standing there on that beach, he said:

"... these men came here - British and our allies, and Americans - to storm these beaches for one purpose only, not to gain anything for ourselves, not to fulfill any ambitions that America had for conquest, but just to preserve freedom. . . . Many thousands of men have died for such ideals as these... but these young boys... were cut off in their prime. . . I devoutly hope that we will never again have to see such scenes as these. I think and hope, and pray, that humanity will have learned... we must find some way . . . to gain an eternal peace for this world." ("Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life," by Carlo D'Este, p. 705.)

The message of the bible is that - where human efforts failed before WWII, and continued to fail afterwards at bringing about that peace that Eisenhower hoped for - in the suffering of Jesus Christ, that peace is truly and actually achieved for all time.

Knowing that He did all that for us, may we submit to the testing of our faith today; may we persevere whatever comes, knowing and believing as the apostle Paul tells us that, *"If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure with Him, we will also reign with Him."*

But we'll never be able to do that without God's help. So let us pray now and ask Him for that grace to persevere under testing and trials so as to prove - to us, not to God - the genuineness of our faith.