

James 1:1-4 Count It All Joy

INTRODUCTION

People of God, last week I had informed you that I was going to be preaching through the letter of James over the course of the next 5 or 6 weeks. I don't think that is going to be possible. As I was preparing my sermon for today, I only got to verse 4. So, it is going to take significantly longer to get through James than I first anticipated. And that is OK. God's intention is to sanctify us through suffering with patience, and so let this sermon series be a small embodiment of that glorious truth.

Let me recap for you what the book of James is about.

James is writing to the "brotherhood" of Christian Leaders in the brand new "firstfruits" Church (1:18) which has suffered persecution at the hands of the Jews, notably Saul, and has thus been "dispersed" as a result of the martyrdom of Stephen (1:1; Acts 8:1-3). The issue that the Church was struggling with was, what does it look like to live by faith (2:14-26) under persecution, and simultaneously implement the "righteousness of God", His Kingdom Rule, in which Christ restores all things (Acts 3:20-21).

To see God's "righteousness" i.e. Kingdom Rule, established on Earth, James exhorts these new Christians that they must first become "perfect," mature, by suffering with patience. But the only thing they are maturing in sin, which when fully grown leads to death/murder (Acts 1:15; 4:2). James has to convince the Church leaders to instead be meek and humble, and to not to be angry and violent and "zealous." He says they should not use their tongues (preaching) to advocate imitating their enemies through

murder, nor should they seek to appease their oppressors to alleviate their suffering. In order to reap a harvest of righteousness (3:18) they must patiently suffer with Christ and sow peace, and mercy, and meekness, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (1:20) they are looking for.

Let us now make a beginning into the letter of James. Beginning in verse 1.

James,

Stop. There are two different options we have for deciding which James this could be. Either it is James the Son of Zebedee, or it is James, the half-brother of Jesus. While I am tempted to bore with all the reasons for why people think which James it is, I will not. But I am going to work from the assumption that it is James the son of Zebedee, not the half brother of Jesus.

The name of James is the Anglicized version of the name Jacob. When we think of the name Jacob, we think of the Patriarch Jacob who fathered the 12 Tribes of Israel.

Interestingly, the letter of James/Jacob addresses the various trials of life that come upon the 12 Tribes in the Dispersion. Jacob the Patriarch went through various trials in his life, which were designed by God to bring him to maturity.

We can think of the stories of Jacob and Esau, Jacob's difficult dealings with Laban, Jacob's wrestling match with God, and his suffering the loss of his son Joseph, or so he thought. And more to the point, he also has to suffer with his 12 Sons who were

often foolish and violent. Think of the incident with Dinah, and how they murdered the Shechemites and stole their property. Or how they threw Joseph their brother into a pit.

And so like the Patriarch Jacob, the Jacob or James who writes this letter writes about facing various trials, and suffering through them, in order to learn wisdom and come to maturity. And he likewise warns against anger and violence that these “brothers” were engaged in. We will see these themes develop more as we move through the letter.

How does James introduce himself?

a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

James bases the authority of his writing on one simple fact. He is a bondservant, a slave of Jesus Christ. In Mark 10:35 James and John pulled Jesus to the side and asked Him to do for them whatever they wanted. And when Jesus asked what it was, they said, “*Grant us that we may sit, one on your right hand, and the other on your left, in your glory.*”

Jesus responded saying:

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

³⁹*They said to Him, “We are able.”*

So Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit on

My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.”

And given the theology of the Gospels, especially Mark’s Gospel, who got to sit on Jesus’ right hand and left hand in his glory? The two thieves on the cross. For Christ’s throne of glory is the cross where He reigns as king of the Jews. And everyone who desires to reign with King Jesus must likewise reign as he did, through suffering, through baptism and drinking the cup of his suffering. He therefore says,

“You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first of all, shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:42ff).

From this incident I think we can take a good guess that it was probably also James and John who were arguing with the other disciples one chapter earlier in Mark 9:33-35 about who was the greatest among of them. But Jesus told them, *“If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mk. 9:35).*

Therefore James, the Son of Zebedee, one of the Sons of Thunder who wanted to rule in glory and power, with King Jesus, and who thought that he and his brother were the greatest of the apostles, finally came to understand what Jesus had taught them: that the true authority, the true greatness to rule with King Jesus is to be found in one thing – in a person’s suffering service to Jesus Christ.

Likewise, for anyone who seeks to be first, anyone who seeks preeminence over others to command people to do anything, anyone who seeks to lead others, and be influential, let him be blessed with the gift of humility and learn from his suffering that he might become a servant of all. For this is the pathway to glory.

The apostle Paul likewise told us the same about the Lord Jesus in Philippians 2, saying:

⁵Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. ⁹Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The one who reigns in glory with God the Father and who has a name above every name, is the one who first became a bondservant, making himself of no reputation, laying his life down for the sake of others. The one who was equal to God, did not consider that equality to be boasted or held over people's heads, rather, he held himself in lowliness of mind, esteeming others better than himself. This is the kind of man that Jesus is. And it is most necessary for us to be like Him. If we are ever going to be sit with Jesus in his glory and rule with him, then we

must first learn to stand with him in his suffering and serve with him. Thus James says, “*God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.*” – James 4:6

And this is how James then introduces himself, a bondservant of Jesus Christ.

Who are the recipients of this letter?

To the twelve tribes which are Dispersed: Greetings.

These Twelve Tribes James calls them in 1:18 *a kind of firstfruits of God’s creatures*. These are the earliest Christians, the very first ones to be converted to Christ after Pentecost. Thus they are Jewish Christians. In fact the term ‘Christian’ hadn’t even been invented yet at the time this letter was written.

These Twelve Tribes, as he calls them, are dispersed because of the persecution that arose after the stoning of Stephen. Acts 8 says:

Saul was consenting to Stephen’s death.

And, at that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all dispersed throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. ⁴ Therefore those who were dispersed went everywhere preaching the word.

These same Jewish Christians who were dispersed in Acts 8 to Judea and Samaria were dispersed even further in Acts 11:19.

¹⁹Now those who were dispersed after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. ²⁰But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

Now one of the first things we can notice from the Dispersion of the first Christians from Jerusalem is that God used the persecution of His Church to spread the Gospel. Luke expresses the same thing in narrative form as Paul does later in Philippians 1 when he talks about his imprisonment. He says, “*But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the Gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ.*”

God frequently uses horrible things like suffering and death and persecution to bring about good ends. Just consider the greatest sin ever committed in the history of the world was the crucifixion of the Son of God. But it was through the worst sin that God brought the greatest good to have ever come to the world.

The early church experienced severe hardships, men and women both being murdered and thrown in prison, families being torn apart, and houses destroyed. These are all horrible things. Sinful things. Before his conversion, Saul truly was a wicked and evil man who was not looking to do anything except stamp out the

new church. But God used Saul's efforts to stamp out the church, to spread the gospel and to build his church.

And God used the imprisonment of Paul to spread the Gospel.

And so, we must never lose sight of two truths when we are in the midst of various trials. The first is, we ought to be on the lookout as to how the Gospel of Christ can be furthered in the midst of this trial. What is the new thing God is doing in these various trials to help us focus on His Gospel, and to spread word about Jesus Christ in the midst of that trial.

We tend to forget such things, and merely buckle down and try to get through the trial. Or we whine and complain and focus too much on ourselves, and not enough on God, missing the unique opportunity God is providing for us to become more familiar with the Gospel, and also tell others about the Lord Jesus.

The second is this: God strikes straight blows with crooked sticks. God uses sin to bless. God causes life to spring from death. He causes joy to erupt from gloom, and laughter to be born from mourning and sorrow. "The Bible can be interpreted as a string of God's triumphs cleverly disguised as disasters" (Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*, p. 304).

Certainly we do not like to hear this, but this is the truth which is embodied in the cross of Christ. Here in the cross these two truths come together to embrace one another. Suffering produces joy. And we must therefore come to sober terms with this truth, for it is the only way in which we can joyfully endure the trials which God gives to us. Thus, James says:

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,

That word “fall” is used in the story of the Good Samaritan. When the man going down to Jericho “fell” among robbers. The idea is that the man fell into the trap of the robbers, and so the robbers fell upon him. They attacked him suddenly without warning.

And that is how trials often seem to us. They are sudden unprovoked attacks. We get jumped by various trials as we are minding our own business. Thus, we fall into trials which have been set for us like traps.

What were some of the trials which these early Christians fell into? Death of loved ones, imprisonment, destruction of homes, plundering of goods, loss of reputation and security, for starters. All these things and much more.

The Veenstra’s fell into a very difficult trial with Javen. Many of you have fallen into difficult trials in the loss of children, sickness, daily stress and anxiety, broken and distressed relationships, job troubles, marriage troubles. And other personal hardships.

And some of the trials that have fallen upon you, have been with you your whole life. A difficult a strained relationship with your father or mother. Health complications spanning many years. The ongoing and continued effects of some sinful decision in the past, continue to hound you to this day.

Now these trials which we fall into are not outside of God’s control. In fact, we should consider them as God’s traps that He

sets for us. These are things that God has sovereignly orchestrated to take place in your life so that through the difficulty and suffering which comes to us through these trials, we would be more conformed to Jesus Christ.

This is the reason why we ought to count it all joy. Which can be very difficult for people accept, if you do not have faith in Christ. In fact, I think part of what it means to have faith in Christ is to embrace this truth and reality – suffering produces joy?

So James says, *Count it all joy when you fall into various kinds of trials.* Why should I be joyful that God has set such a trap for me to fall into? Why should I rejoice in this trial which has fallen upon me, in which I now mourn the loss of my husband or wife or child? Why should I rejoice that my reputation is now utterly destroyed? Why should I rejoice that I am going to be up to my ears in medical expenses? Why should I rejoice I my hardships and difficulties and troubles? Why should I rejoice?

Because, ³ **you know that the testing of your faith produces patience.**

⁴ **But let patience have *its* perfect (maturing) work, that you may be perfect (mature) and complete, lacking nothing.**

When God designs a trial for you, when God sets a trap, it is not meant to destroy you. It might feel like it. But actually the purpose of these various trials is to produce maturity in you, and to make you like Jesus. The Christian faith is all about maturing to manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of

Christ, Paul says in Eph. 4. Jesus Christ is the first fully grown man.

He is the first one who has grown up to full maturity and glory, and as such he has acquired true wisdom, which is why John sees him with hair white as snow. For he has the full wisdom of the aged. He acquired the wisdom of God through the suffering and trials he experienced. And all of us down here are just trying to catch up.

God's plan of salvation and redemption is to mature us, to glorify us, and therefore to make us grow up into Christ. Salvation is God restoring us to the image and likeness of Christ. As the Lord Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, "*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"

Many of us think that salvation is just going to Heaven when you die. But salvation is not just something waiting for you in Heaven. Salvation is an experiential union you have with the Living Christ now by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is conforming you into His image and likeness. He is glorifying you, and sanctifying you.

Normally, when Christians use the word sanctification to talk about this process of becoming more holy, more like Christ, we are talking about sinning less and less. We think of sanctification as improving in our morality.

Certainly there are elements of that in sanctification. But the part of sanctification, or maturation, that James speaks of is the perfection which comes about through suffering our trials with

patience and joy. This is how Christ was perfected. Heb. 5 says, *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and once made perfect, or mature he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*

Heb. 2 says:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect (mature) through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

In other words, Jesus was made perfect, made mature, through suffering trials with patience. And that is why he could have joy in them. *Who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Jesus Christ is the captain of our salvation. He is bringing many sons to glory with Him. The road he took to glory and perfection and maturation travelled through the suffering of the cross. And the road that we must travel to perfection and glory and maturation is in Christ, and therefore we must also suffer with him in patience and joy.

Thus, he is not ashamed to call us his brothers, because we joyfully share in the fellowship of his sufferings. That is what the church is. We are the joyful brotherhood and fellowship of Christ's sufferings. We carry our crosses daily, with joy, and thus save our souls.

This is the way to become fully a son of God. Thus Paul says in Rom. 8:17 that *we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

“For the follower of Christ, suffering is not a gift simply because it ‘builds character’ (as our culture might say), but because suffering and death (physically, spiritually, emotionally) is the Christ-appointed path to vindication, maturity, and a new empowered life. And Christians are called to be co-rulers with Christ: “if we remain steadfast, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:12).”¹

Therefore, in order to count it all joy, we must look beyond the earthly struggles of our trials and sufferings, and we must look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

When reflecting on his trials in 2 Cor. 4, Paul says – *“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light momentary affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us (producing in us) a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look to the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen, are eternal.”*

What are the temporal things Paul does not want us to look to? The trials. The suffering. The pain. The loss. The shame. And all the external circumstances which are making his life hard and difficult now. He doesn’t look to them. He doesn’t focus his

¹ Jeff Meyers, James, 39.

attention on how hard his life is, how miserable his condition is. How sad he is, or how much pain he is in. For he knows that if you look to the trial, if you focus only on the trap, then you will miss your only way of escape.

The trial you are in will pass away. It will not last forever. In fact, Paul says it is a light and momentary affliction, which lasts for a moment. The reason why people do lose heart in the midst of their trials, People of God, is because they focus too much on their trial. They become consumed with it. They internalize it and see it as some form of punishment which God is bringing to them for their sin. They focus on their own thoughts and feelings about the trial. They focus only on how sad they are and how bad their life is now as a result.

I don't mean to be too harsh, people of God, but that is spiritual pride. You hold yourself and your own comfort and earthly pleasure in too high esteem, and so you refuse to allow the trials of life to conform you into Christ's image, when your only response is, 'Woe is me.'

Instead of looking to the trial and even your own suffering, you should instead fix your eyes on Christ, for only Christ is eternal and abiding. Your trial will pass away, pain goes away, but Christ endures forever. So endure your sufferings and trials and afflictions with joy and patience.

Focus on the Lord of glory, and see with the eyes of faith that because Jesus had to be perfected through humility and suffering, and so he did it with patience and with joy for the glory that awaited him, at the right hand of the throne of God, you too

must endure the trial with patient suffering with joy, for the glory that awaits you as well.

And in this way, you will be well on your way to becoming more like Jesus Christ, perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Amen.