

James 1:1-4 – Count it all Joy

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We're going to read the first four verses of this letter from James, and then we're going to open in prayer. Okay? Goes like this:" ¹*James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.* ²*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,* ³*for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness* ⁴*And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* (ESV)

Stop there. Let's pray. Father, Lord, there's so much here, as A.W. Tozer used to say, "An ocean of truth in a drop of speech." And even though we're covering, Lord, just these first four verses of this letter from James, we pray that You would enlarge our understanding and open our hearts to really hear from You today.

Let the ministry of Your Spirit touch our heart, and let this word speak to us, Lord, in ways that we can take hold of, and go from this place today having been equipped with Your Word. Be with us, we pray, Father. In Jesus name, Amen. Amen.

By way of just a little bit of an introduction, there are several men in the New Testament that go by the name of James. There's actually several, but you know, we have reliable historical evidence concerning the identity of this man. This is the man that they called James the Just, and he was a man who eventually rose to lead the church in Jerusalem. So he was kind of the pastor-overseer of the church, the Christian Church in Jerusalem.

But, without a doubt, the most notable pedigree, I guess you'd say, of this man is the fact that he was raised in the same home with our Lord Jesus Christ. This man James was the half-brother, and just one of the brothers, who was born to Joseph and Mary. There were also, they had sisters too. But he was one of the brothers.

And this, by the way, is the James that the Apostle Paul speaks of, who got a special post-resurrection appearance by Jesus. It's actually given as a remark in 1 Corinthians. Let me show it to you on the screen, chapter 15:

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1 Corinthians 15:6-7 (ESV)

⁶Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. (That's a euphemism for death.) ⁷Then He appeared (look at this) to James, then to all the apostles.

So, it's interesting here. James got a special visitation, a special singular visitation by Jesus after His resurrection. Isn't that amazing? And it's very possible, although we don't know for sure, it's very possible that was the point when James put his faith in Jesus as Savior, because we happen to know that none of his earthly brothers during his ministry believed in Him. This is actually recorded for us in the book of John.

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John 7:5 (ESV)

For not even His brothers believed in Him.

And that's referring to earthly brothers, the sons of Joseph and Mary.,

And so that's what makes it even more amazing when we read at the beginning of this letter, James says, "¹*James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Now think, circle that word servant in your mind for just a moment. This is that word we've come upon many times throughout the New Testament. We dealt with it in 1&2 Timothy and Titus.

This is that word *doulos* in the Greek again, and it frankly is better translated bond-servant or bondsman. And you'll remember a bond-servant was someone who willingly dedicated their entire life to their master. They said, I have a good master, and I refuse to be released from my servitude to this individual, and I choose to serve him for the rest of my life.

What's interesting here is that James considered himself a lifelong bond-servant of Jesus Christ. That's pretty amazing. But I want you to notice one more thing, and it's a very significant thing, at the end of verse 1. Again, he says, "*A servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" And I want you to see that connection, that connecting word, "and". He says, I am a bond-servant of God AND of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What James is doing here is, he is expressing his devotion and his service in such a way as to put God the Father and Jesus on an equal plane. And I want you to make no mistake about that. When James says, "I am a bond-servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ," he's putting them together.

And that's a really incredible thing in light of the fact, I mean, can you imagine what it would've been like for James to be raised in the same home as Jesus and then come to understand His equality with God the Father? I mean, how do you begin to wrap your head around that sort of a reality? And how difficult that probably was for the guys who were raised with Him, because you just become so familiar with people with whom you are raised.

But he did say that. And then you'll notice at the end of verse 1, this is where James tells us who the letter is addressed to. He says, "*To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.*" And then he says, "*Greetings.*" So when he says twelve tribes, he's talking about the Jews. So this letter is written to Jews. Now that doesn't mean that it's not applicable to Gentiles.

It is very applicable to Gentiles. But he, remember, James was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, and there came a time where his church got scattered because of persecution that arose. You notice he says, "*to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.*" The Greek is the word *diaspora*, and it's the idea of being dispersed.

And that has happened several times throughout history to the Jews. The very first dispersion happened hundreds and hundreds of years earlier when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. We've gone through this many times in our Old Testament study, and they were dispersed among the nations.

Well, that was the first dispersion. But I don't believe that's what James is talking about. James, remember, is a pastor. He was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, and I believe that he's thinking about the scattering of believers that took place in his lifetime, because he knows. He remembers there was that, and you can read about it by the way in the Book of Acts. But he remembers that there arose a great persecution and a great outpouring of opposition against the Christian Church, right about that time when Stephen was martyred in the city.

Remember, they stoned him (Stephen) to death. The Jews surrounded him and threw rocks at him until he was dead. And the man who would later become the Apostle Paul, who was known at that time as Saul of Tarsus, was standing there in total agreement for what was going on.

And it tells us that Saul began to breathe out murderous threats against the church. And he went from house to house arresting people and dragging them into jail and before the courts just for being believers. So, guess what happened? Guess what the people did? Let me show you:

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Acts 8:1 (ESV)

¹*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, (remember, that's James's Church) and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."*

They stayed put, but the rest of the people, they scattered. They left. They just said, we got to go find a place to live where we're going to be safe.

And so, the people that James is writing to had to up and leave their homes, and they were scattered throughout all the area. He begins to say in verse 2, and I want you to look with me in your Bible as you read these words, verse 2, he says, "²*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,"*

Now, I want to stop you right there for a moment because I want to talk to you about just how naturally absurd this statement is. I say, naturally absurd. What I mean by that is, we don't naturally consider trials, difficulties, and problems in life as something worthy of joy. They're worthy of lots of other things, but joy isn't one of them.

So this is a statement that can only really be applied to our lives in a supernatural context, and that means, with the Lord helping you to understand what is actually going on in your life when you're going through hardships and trials and storms. Right? He says, "*Count it all joy,*" when you go through those sorts of things, whatever they may be.

And then he goes on in verses 3 and 4 to explain why our trials and storms are worthy of joy. Look at verse 3 with me. He says, "*For you know,*" and I always love the strength of those words, "³*For you know, (you know, you know) that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."*

There's two things I want to bring out about that. The first thing is, "*for you know,*" and that's a statement of just, (grunt), there's strength there. You know this. We forget it all the time, don't we? I mean, like all the time. I am constantly talking to believers, and in my own life too, when I'm going through a storm, I forget all the good things that God's going to bring out of it. I forget all that. All I can think about is what I'm going through at the moment. It's painful. It's hurtful. It stinks. I hate it. I hate going through trials, don't you? I mean, who likes it? Oh, yippie, another trial. They're a big fat bummer.

And that's what we all think. But he says, "we know," and there's an assurance there. We know, "*that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness.*"

Now, I have to tell you something. That word steadfastness in the Greek means endurance. And I like endurance better than what the ESV has put in here. Steadfastness is fine. It's correct. But I like the word endurance because I don't use the word steadfastness very often in my vocabulary. I looked up this word in the Greek, and you know what I found out? This word endurance, or steadfastness, carries the quality of what it takes to help you finish a marathon.

That's important because, we've made the mention many times throughout our studies of the word, our Christian life is a marathon run. It's not a sprint. I used to be a sprinter when I was in school. I could do the 50-yard dash and beat most of my classmates, but after about 60 yards, I petered out, and it just, I was gone, and the rest of them just blew past me.

Well, that doesn't do me very much good in my Christian walk. I have to learn to pace myself because it's a long-distance run. And James is saying here that when our faith is tested by trials, difficulties, problems, storms, that it produces the ability to endure in us and to carry on even when life is difficult. And that's why he goes on to say in verse 4, look with me, "*And let steadfastness (or, if you will, endurance) have its full effect,*" and that means its complete or total result in your life.

Right. Let that, that creating of endurance have its full effect in your life to produce what God wants it to produce. So that, and then he gives the payoff now here at the end of verse 4, "*so that you may be perfect.*" Now, I want you to stop there for just a moment. Whenever the Bible uses the word perfect, you have to be very careful applying that in our typical American way of thinking of perfection.

Because people say all the time, well, I'm not perfect, but, and then they go into talk about, which is really an interesting thing to say, as if anyone wondered if you might possibly be perfect. It's like, seriously, you're not perfect? We all know that none of us are perfect.

We know that none of us will cease to, in fact, make mistakes, mess up and sin this side of glory. We know that. We get it. When the Bible uses the word perfect here, it literally means, having finished the race or having reached the finish line. We're kind of back to that idea of a marathon or a picture, the picture of a race. And so he says, you want to let hardship in your life have its way with you, which is to build up your endurance so that you can finish the race. And

that's that idea of being made perfect, if you will. And he goes on to use the word complete, and that word encompasses the idea of gaining the whole portion of what God wants to birth in your life.

Do you understand, Christians, that God wants to give you lots of things that are going to bless your life? And James is saying that, if you allow this endurance to be formed and shaped in your life, that you will begin to take on more of the portion that God wants to give to you. And he says, I want you to have the whole portion.

So he says, let this steadfastness, this endurance, have its full and total result in your life. That having reached the finish line, you'll get the whole portion of what it means to finish the race. The whole portion, right? That's what he's talking about here. And, you have to admit, that's a pretty powerful incentive. If we could even fathom what the whole portion is, which is very difficult for us to do.

But you have to understand something about this promise, this idea, what James is talking about and these incentives that he's kind of laying out for you and me, to begin to understand that the difficulties and storms of life can have a positive impact in our lives. They are predicated on two very important things, and these are important for all of us to understand.

But the first is something that is from God, and the second is something that is from you. So let me lay these out for you. First, What is from God? in terms of the incentive of understanding what we're dealing with here, and the first is in Romans 8. You know this. You know this.

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Romans 8:28 (ESV)

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God, (Paul writes, in this case) all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.

And the reason this is such an important verse to understand when you're enduring trials is that you need to know that God has purposed that the trials in your life will eventually bear good fruit and be a blessing to you. He has purposed that that will be the case, and that's very important to remember.

You need to know that you're not fighting a losing battle. And I'm talking right now to those of you who are going through trials right now, going through storms right now. You need to know that God has purposed good things to

come out of that storm. That's an incredibly encouraging thing to hear when you're going through a hard time.

I know what it's like to go through a hard time. I've been through many myself. And I'm one of those people, when I'm going through a storm, all I can see is the storm. All I can see is what's in front of my eyes, and it's just this raging wind and the chaos of life when you're going through a difficult season.

Oh, just, it's terrible. So I share this with you as an encouragement in the midst of the storm, that God has purposed good things to come out of that storm, and that's so important to remember. That's His promise.

But you see there's another element of this, that is on your side of the equation. It's something that you and I need to do, and it's encompassed in Hebrews 12:7,11. Look at it, here it says:

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Hebrews 12:7, 11 (ESV)

⁷It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline...?

It is for discipline. And that word means training. It is for training that you have to endure. There's that word, endurance. Again, God is treating you as sons, for what son is there whom his father is not disciplined.

¹¹For the moment (the writer says) all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (and I want you to take special note of these last eight words) to those who have been trained by it.

Those of you who've been around Calvary Chapel a while, you've heard me talk about this on several occasions. You've heard me emphasize those last eight words. This is a wonderful promise. And this promise is much of what we're talking about here in the first few verses of James, in the sense that God has purposed that through endurance of the trials and storms that you're going through right now, there will come a harvest of righteousness.

There will be good fruit. There will be a peaceful work of God in your life that will come from this, IF... Okay, so, this is a conditional promise for those who have been trained by it. Does everyone who goes through hardships receive training? Or is everyone open to training? Unfortunately, no, they're not.

Not everyone is. And that's why you might run into an old person who's been through a lot of history in their life, and they're bitter, and they're angry. And they're sour, and they poison everybody they come in contact with, because they haven't been trained. When I talk about having been trained, or whatever, we're talking about a sort of permission that we give to the Holy Spirit during times of trial and difficulty to speak to us, to open us to what we need to learn so that we might receive the training from the Lord that is important. And it's all about coming to the Lord and humbling ourselves enough to learn. Being humble enough, when you're going through a difficult season, to say, I could stand to learn something from this.

I need to grow, so I'm going to open my heart to receive from the Lord what He wants to share with me, and I want to be trained in this situation. I have to tell you though, whenever we talk about these kind of very positive things that are possible in our lives, I have to always talk to you and warn you about the hindrances that I have seen or the barriers that I've seen to people actually being open to the learning and the training process that God wants to bring in our life through hardship and trials. And one of those huge hindrances is the belief that God always wants me happy, healthy, and prosperous. Now, don't get me wrong, I believe God loves you, and I believe God wants to do good things in your life. Here's the problem, though. You define good differently than He does sometimes. We have our own understanding of what we call good, you see.

And usually painful things don't fall under that particular definition. And did you notice that the writer of Hebrews reminded us that when we're going through a time of training, it's usually painful, but later on it produces something that's good? Well, we have a real hard time seeing that because we just don't have that kind of perspective.

We have a hard time looking down the road, as it were. And seeing what's going to come out of those things, the blessings that are going to come from them. And because this teaching that God always wants me happy, and God always wants to bless me and always wants to prosper me, is so popular.

It creates an assumption in the heart and mind of a believer that anything bad, or at least anything that I consider bad, or uncomfortable, or inconvenient, is never from God, and it should always be resisted and rebuked. And so what you end up having, and I see this a lot, is Christians going around, they're constantly resisting and rebuking what they think is a work of the devil, when, in fact, it is a work of the Lord.

Now, don't get me wrong, the Bible does say that we are to resist the devil. In fact, we're going to see that in this very letter. James is going to remind us of that. But you know, the Bible also tells us that sometimes God brings hardships into our lives. He allows hardships so that we will learn to endure.

I had somebody, I did a Q and A on the 29th. Aaron was gone; he's been down in San Diego with his wife's family. And so I did a Q and A all by myself at home, which was kind of challenging, but I got it done.

Somebody asked the question, "Why? Why did God allow Satan to sift Peter like wheat?"

And I said, "Well, because Peter had some rough edges. They had to get worn down."

Of course, we don't have any rough edges, right? It was Peter's issue, not ours. But you see that, I don't know if this messes with your theology or not, God allows Satan to sift us from time to time for God's purpose.

You remember what Jesus said to Peter? Peter's shooting off his mouth during the Last Supper.

Jesus just got done saying, tonight you're all going to desert Me.

And Peter's like, No way, man. Not the rock, not this guy. These guys, these yo-yos here, might leave, and I'm going to stay right by your side.

And Jesus just kind of looked at him and said, Peter. Peter. Peter, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. "*But I have prayed for you*" (Luke 22:32 ESV).

That phrase, "But I have prayed for you," is another way of saying, I said, yes, but I have prayed for you that, when you return, you would strengthen your brothers.

Now again, I don't know if that messes with your theology a little bit, that God will allow those kind of hardships in our lives to do that work of sanctification. But it is a biblical fact and there's no getting around it.

Let me show you what Peter had to say about this. He said:

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1 Peter 4:19 (ESV)

¹⁹Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

This is the man who was sifted who wrote this. And so, when you sit and look at that verse right there up on the screen, and I ask you the question, so, does this verse tell you that suffering is sometimes according to the will of God?

You have to give me an answer, because Peter says, "*Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will....*" Now, listen, I'm not talking to you about a Heavenly Father who enjoys putting you into the fire for His own purpose of pleasure or something like that. Not, nothing like that. Nothing like that.

But I am talking to you about a Heavenly Father who cares more about your holiness than He does your happiness, because He knows that true holiness is what brings joy. And so it's important that we understand that. So, why does God allow difficult times? Why does He allow Satan to buffet and sift us from time to time?

It's right there at the end of verse 4. Guys, look with me again at the end of verse 4, here in this text. It is so that you may reach the finish line, "*be perfect and complete,*" again, having the whole portion of what God has granted to you, and that you might be "lacking in nothing," but have all of what God has for you.

Do you understand, Christians? We are the biggest barrier to our own growth. You are your worst enemy, and so am I, to our own personal growth in the Lord, but God is doing a work in our lives. And so, I hope this is an encouragement to those of you who are going through trials, going through storms, going through hardships, right now.

I know that it's easier to probably just blame it all on the enemy and just start rebuking and resisting. I rebuke you in the name of Jesus. There's a place for spiritual warfare. There is a place for spiritual warfare. I'm not saying spiritual warfare isn't necessary. It is, but we have to be discerning.

You can't just curse everything that comes your way, because sometimes the Lord has given permission to the enemy to sift you as wheat. But in that sifting process, God's will is brought to fruition in our lives. And it's a beautiful thing, and it ends with endurance. And endurance gives us hope. Amen?

Let's stand together. I know. In my heart when I say, Amen, I hear it coming from your heart. You're saying, well, if we have to. It's kind of like, this is one of those messages. It's kind of like, well, I suppose you had to give it. Well, good, we got that over with. Now we can talk about other things. But the fact of the matter is, I know that some of you are going through some real storms right now in life, and you needed to hear this today.

Because storms will come and storms will go, but you keep your eyes on Jesus, and you'll be able to walk on the water. Just keep your eyes on Jesus. Get them off the wind and the waves, right? Get them onto the Lord. He'll see you through. He will see you through. We'll have some folks up here to pray with you if you need prayer this morning.

Father, I thank You so much for this start for the book of James. And Lord, we needed this today. We, going into a new year, we're kind of peeking through the door of 2022 and wondering what's behind it. And yet, Lord, we have to just remember that our lives are in Your hands. And we're going to walk into this new year with You. With You, hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm. And come what may, we will entrust this thing to the Lord.

Father, fill us with grace and courage and wisdom. Teach us Your ways. Help us to lay hold of Your Word, to really put it into practice in our lives. Thank You for giving us this letter from James. So practical. Use it, we pray, as we study through the entirety of this book, to teach us Your will and Your ways. For we ask it in the name of Jesus. And all God's people said together, Amen.

God bless you. Have a good rest of your Sunday.