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James 1:1-4

First Message

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THE MAKING OF A SAINT

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

We begin a new series of studies in the book of James this morning. The theme of this New Testament letter is that life is difficult. Every day brings pressures and stresses. Typically, we are at a loss as to why painful trials come our way. And almost invariably, we respond by trying to avoid or eliminate them from our lives.

My wife brought home a dog when we were first married. We lived in an apartment then, and we quickly discovered we could not leave the dog alone. Whenever we left, she would tear up the couch. I'd get angry and threaten to take her back to the pound, but my wife would plead the dog's case, and I'd relent. We moved into a house, but the dog began to tear up the yard. On the Fourth of July, she would try to hide from the noise of fireworks going off by attempting to dig a hole in the house. Every time an incident like this occurred, I'd threaten to get rid of her, thinking that if I did, I would eliminate a major problem in my life. Finally, Tucker got old and arthritic, and we had to put her to sleep. I knew I would miss her, but I looked forward to being relieved of all the chores and the problems which she created.

I will never forget leaving the vet's office that day. I was so sad, I couldn't talk for four days. That dog had been with us for over ten years. She had shared some of our most enjoyable family times. I noticed her absence everywhere. I was overwhelmed by the thought of not seeing her waiting for me on the front porch. I couldn't believe how much I missed her, how much a part of our family and daily life she had become.

I learned an important lesson that day. When I was finally rid of what I perceived to be a problem in my life, I eliminated a part of life, too. There was a connection between the hassles that the dog caused and the life she brought to our home. Eventually, we got another dog.

The pressures we face in life are much more trying than the problems that come with having a dog, of course. David Roper identifies some of those pressures in these words:

We lose our jobs, we lose our health, we lose our children, one way or another. The wheels fall off our programs, our dreams go belly up, our best laid schemes, "gang aft a-gley." We labor long hours with only fragmentary results. We're disregarded and ignored, slandered and maligned; we get trampled on by insensitive people. Some days we fall flat on our faces; our best efforts are a disaster, our best foot forward becomes a bitter embarrassment.

It is a natural response to try to escape the difficult circumstances that befall us. But, if we persevere in the midst of our problems, we discover the very life of God embedded at the root of our difficulties. The challenge of the Christian walk is to know this and beware the temptation to flee unpleasant circumstances. What we should do instead is seek to respond to the pressures in a godly way, and thereby find eternal life. This type of response takes a lot of practice in practical wisdom and spiritual living, and this is where the book of James

comes to the Christian's aid. This letter is given to help us learn how to live life in the trenches.

For our first study, we will take the opening four verses of chapter 1.

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings. Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:1-4 NASB)

The New Testament makes mention of several men named James, but the author of this letter is undoubtedly the brother of Jesus. At first, James rejected Jesus as Messiah, but he was converted in a special appearance of Jesus (1 Cor 15). Later, James became a prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem. About A.D. 62, he was martyred.

The book of James is to the New Testament what the book of Proverbs is to the Old. The letter is pithy, very Jewish, and it has many references to the teachings of Jesus. It is written in the same style as the words of Jesus spoken in the Sermon on the Mount. Its message is challenging and bold. Fifty-four different commands are given in its 108 verses.

In verse 1 we learn that James based his authority on his being a "servant of God." This is the same term that was applied to Moses and Joshua. James adds to this OT reference to allegiance the NT declaration of his submission to the Lord Jesus, who was none other than his brother.

The letter is addressed to the twelve tribes who were dispersed abroad, literally, the Diaspora ("that which is sown"). At the time it was written, the church consisted primarily of Jewish Christians (the gospel proclamation to the Gentiles was not yet in full swing). Thus the letter was not written to the church in Jerusalem, but to the entire church, the Israel of God, scattered throughout the world. They were facing great economic oppression under wealthy landlords, a circumstance that is important in understanding the truth of the letter. The writer's greeting to his readers is but a single word: "Rejoice."

So the letter of James centers on the fact that life is filled with suffering and pain. I want to begin our studies by talking about four aspects of suffering: its nature, its purpose, the major obstacle it presents, and our response to it.

The nature of suffering assures us of its inevitability in our lives. No matter who we are or where we live, we will encounter suffering. A trial is any circumstance that produces pressure so that our natural response is to seek relief from it. But we cannot avoid it. James does not say "if" we encounter trials, but "when" we encounter them. It is a given that we will have trials.

The Bible identifies three sources of suffering. First, suffering is one result of the consequences of sin. Many people refer to this kind of suffering as trials, but clearly this is not what James is talking about. Second, the Bible says that suffering is a result of persecution. While this kind of suffering might be in view here, in the New Testament, a different word is used to describe it. And third, suffering comes because God designed life that way. He allows suffering. At times, we will face suffering because we are Christians; at other times suffering will be our lot because we are part of the human family. As we have seen, the people to whom James was writing were suffering because they were being oppressed by wealthy landowners.

The nature of various trials is further defined by situations that have the effect of “testing” our faith. The word means to prove, to try out; it was used of the process of refining metals to test their purity. Webster defines “test” as “an experiment to test the quality, value, or usefulness” of something. Trials become tests which will have the effect of showing ourselves, and God, what is inside of us.

This was the very thing that God was doing with the nation of Israel in their wilderness wanderings, as we see in the book of Deuteronomy, “You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deut 8:2). God tested Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice Isaac. He allowed Satan to test his servant Job. God even allowed Satan to test Jesus in the wilderness. In each instance, the test revealed what was in the heart of the one being tested.

The last-minute touchdown drive tests the footballer’s ability. The final examination tests the student’s knowledge. The difficult surgery tests the doctor’s brilliance. Trials, however, do not test our abilities, talents, intelligence or social skills. Trials test our faith. And there is a deep connection between trials and faith. The question that we as Christian must answer is not whether we will succeed or even if we will live, but will we trust? Will we believe God and obey him? Our answers will be apparent by the way we respond to trials.

The second issue raised by our text is the purpose behind suffering. Trials and suffering are not dictated by caprice. Everything comes from the hand of God. Nothing is left to chance. Each suffering we experience is uniquely designed to change us and mold us into the likeness of God. James says that trials work out endurance, and that endurance works out maturity, perfect and complete, so that we may not lack anything. It is a two-stage process. The formula is: a yields b, and b yields c.

According to James, suffering produces endurance, which is the ability to take the heat, to remain under the pressure and refuse to quit. This is not mere resignation, a determination to tough it out to the end, but rather, persistence and steadfastness, the quality of being able to remain under the pressure. It is doing God’s will in the face of counter-influences; forgiving slights and unkindnesses for the four hundredth and ninetieth time; remaining in a difficult marriage, struggling against enslaving habits; choosing purity of mind and body in the face of lonely days and long nights; keeping one’s word despite the pain, and obeying when life is hard. Just as an athlete must train rigorously to become strong and conditioned so that he may stay the course, so it is with the trials that test our faith. God is building up our endurance. If that quality is lacking, it will become evident in time.

I had an early lesson in learning endurance. When I was thirteen years old, I went to the Omaha golf and country club to become a caddie. The caddie master told me to take a seat, and that is where I remained all the first day; my name was never called. The same thing happened the second day. But I decided to try it one more time. The third day, close to six in the evening, the caddie master finally called my name and gave me my first job. He wanted to test my endurance, to see whether I would stick it out or quit.

Then, James says, endurance builds maturity. When we face difficult situations that place us under pressure and stress, we become changed, tested people. Suffering makes us into what George Fox called “established men.” We become stable, dependable, durable and strong. Trials leave a lasting mark on us. They have the ability, if we allow them, to mold and shape our character into something which is perfect, something God-like.

Ultimately, God is the process of making us like himself. We don’t know what that will be but, according to the apostle Paul, when we see God face to face, we will be like him. We are being transformed from one image of glory to another, from the glory of man to the glory of God.

But this process of becoming mature and godly is a long and painful one. That is because there is no other way to grow. We don’t grow while we are sitting in the classroom. We are hard rock cases, Mount Rushmore-like projects. God has to take hammer and chisel to our hard hearts. He strikes us, breaks us, chips away at us and hurts us in order that he might make us into the image of himself. Then he puts us under intense heat so that all the impurities will be burned off. What is left will be pure and precious, godly and holy—“perfect and complete, lacking in nothing,” in James’ words. Tom Landry, the former coach of the Dallas Cowboys, used to tell his players, “I make you do what you do not want to do, in order to make you become what you want to be.”

Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because his own character had grown through many years of trials and testings. Joshua was an able leader, fit to enter the Promised Land after forty years of trials and testing in the wilderness. Job, at last, had to confess to God, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee.” Jesus, faithful under the testing of his Father’s hand, qualified to be the unblemished Lamb. Henri Nouwen puts it this way: “What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to a deeper communion.”

Hurt and pain are part of the process of becoming saints.

The major obstacle that suffering presents is learning how to overcome the sense of homelessness we feel when we are undergoing trials. Every day, especially at Christmas time, we see homeless people on our streets. They are vulnerable, naked and exposed to the elements. We look at them sympathetically, but often we pass them by, grateful we are not like them. And yet, inside, we may well be just as homeless as they are.

The recipients of James’ letter were the Diaspora. Aliens and exiles, they were thrown out of their homes to live under the tyranny and whims of wealthy landlords. As Christians, according to Scripture, we are aliens living in this world. We are in the world, but not of it. We may try to create a home, a place that is safe and secure and trial-free, but God will not allow us to do that.

Now the major obstacle we face when we encounter a trial is this very sense of homelessness. Pressure and suffering strip away our false sense of security. The facades that we have built so diligently to save ourselves from sadness, things like careers, fine houses, nice friends and family, are taken away. When the pressure comes, these things that we had looked to for security and protection fail us. It is not that they are lacking in themselves; they just do not endure the test of trials. Things like clothes, degrees, money, country clubs and travel cannot mask the aches and pains, the longings of the human heart. We are uncomfortable, unsatisfied, exposed and naked. We are frightened and lonely. We cry out for the safety of home.

When Israel was in the wilderness and facing testing by God, they wanted to go back to Egypt. They wanted to go home, no matter how miserable and enslaving that was. Ironically, the very thing that God was planning for them was a home, a land flowing with milk and honey. Only one thing was required to enter that place, and that was faith.

Personally, I find that this is the hardest struggle I face when I am suffering. But this is the tension that James says we must live with as Christians. We can't go back to the world for our sense of place and rest. We must move forward, even though we hurt. Our home is in heaven, a building from God, "a house not made with hands." This is what our hearts long for. We prefer, as Paul preferred, to be "absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." In this body we groan, because we feel naked and exposed.

How should we respond to suffering? How should we live in the face of trials? Our text suggests two responses that are absolutely contrary to our natural feelings. The first is, let trials work on perfecting and molding character. Don't fight them. Don't run from your job, your marriage, your family struggle, the pain of losing someone. Let the refiner's fire work out the impurities. Ultimately, God intends good things to come from the trial. Our first step should not be to move away from the pain, but toward it. This is not masochism; it is submission to God. As the Creator, he has the right to do with us as he wills. If we do not let him do his work, we will grow to be angry, resentful and bitter.

But this is not our natural response, is it? Personally, I try everything I can to avoid and eliminate the things that cause pain in my life. I find myself trying to anticipate everything that might go wrong and trying to protect myself from it. I hate the feelings of homelessness, of being naked and exposed. I don't like pain.

We feel this even more keenly with respect to our children. We don't want them to be disappointed and hurt, so we redouble our efforts to protect them from pain. How do we arrive at to such faulty conclusions? If we must let God shape us through trials, then we must allow him to do the same with our children.

David Roper has this to say about our faulty reasoning:

Unfortunately, our concept of God's goodness is based on the faulty assumption that personal happiness is the highest good. True happiness, however, is something more profound than staying in the comfort zone. There are things to be done about our character that can only be done by suffering. To shield us from this suffering would not be good; it would, in fact, rob us of the highest possible good...the Lord permits suffering in order to mold us. Pain puts us on notice that we cannot do without God and pushes us closer to him; it shatters the illusion that we're ad-

equate in ourselves. It draws us close to God and in Him we find the resources to face life and its demands.

James gives a second response: that we "consider it all joy" when we encounter various trials. This response, too, is contrary to our normal feelings. We do not equate pain with joy. But James urges Christians to consider trials as a source of joy for what they produce in our lives, if we allow them. This is not speaking of mindless mirth, a pretend smile, a make-believe joy. Christian joy is a supernatural reaction to trials, one that indicates contentment, despite the pain.

And notice that James says to consider it all joy. He does not say consider some things joy, some things good, some bad, some blessed and some cursed. He indicates that all of life is blessed for the Christian, because everything comes from the hand of God, therefore it is all good and we can be fully joyful for it. We should not look at life as a series of blessings and curses, with our circumstances falling into one column or the other. God sees all our circumstances as a source of joy. He has only one column.

The joy that James is referring to becomes manifest in what the trials accomplish in our relationship with God. Christians who have come through intense pressures and trials will tell you that they did not enjoy what they had to endure, but they would not have traded it because of what they experienced in their relationship with God through it. Pain opens our hearts and reveals our hunger. Pain teaches us that we cannot do without God. Jesus endured the cross, the deepest pain and the deepest testing, for the joy that was set before him. He said to his disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."

Henri Nouwen said this about suffering:

The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become instead, the means to it... True joy can be experienced in the midst of great suffering. It is the joy of being disciplined, purified and pruned. Just as athletes who experience great pain as they run the race can, at the same time, taste the joy of knowing that they are coming closer to their goal, so also can the Beloved experience suffering as a way to the deeper communion for which they yearn. Here joy and sorrow are no longer each other's opposites, but have become the two sides of the same desire to grow to the fullness of the Beloved.

Suffering is an inevitable fact of life. Although trials make us feel like aliens, they are a necessary part of God's work to mold us into what he wants us to become. His call to us is to learn to let trials do their work, to consider all of life, even the wounds that we suffer in the process, to be joy.

I want to conclude this morning by quoting a poem which was a favorite of Ray Stedman's, and which is very appropriate to our study on suffering:

When God wants to drill and skill a man;
When he wants to mold a man to play the noblest part.
When he yearns with all his heart to create so great and bold a
man that all the world will be amazed.
How he ruthlessly perfects whom he royally selects.
How he hammers him and hurts him and with mighty blows
converts him into trial shapes of clay which only God can understand.
How he bends but never breaks when his good he undertakes.

How he uses whom he chooses and with every purpose fuses
him;
by every act induces him to try his power out.
God knows what he's about!

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