

All Joy

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, as Dick said, we're going to begin the book of James on page 1011, if you'd like to open that up in the New Testament part of your Bible and follow along.

I've never preached through the book of James. We're going to do this up till Easter. I've just returned from Australia, and it's 35 degrees in Australia. And when I returned, the house, the heating had broken.

And you feel very sorry for me. That's very good. And so for a day or two, I carried around a little oil heater. So if anything I say sounds a bit cold, you'll probably know why.

Now, James is famous. It is the most accessible and practical, provocative, prophetic book in all the New Testament.

It sings, it stings. He's not afraid to tell us the truth, and he's gentle as well. It's written by Jesus' brother.

[1 : 08] Do you know in the Gospels, after Joseph and Mary married, we're told that they had six more boys. And the oldest of those boys was called James.

So strictly speaking, he's a half-brother of Jesus. And growing up, and when they were young men, James did not believe that Jesus was the Christ. In fact, he thought he was crazy, out of his mind, and opposed him.

But when Jesus rose from the dead, in 1 Corinthians 15, we read about the fact that Jesus makes a special appearance to James on his own.

And it was the beginning of a new life. James was utterly transformed by the experience. So you look in verse 1, how does he introduce himself?

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I know it must have been tough growing up with Jesus as your brother. I mean, I don't want to be too hard on him.

[2 : 08] I have two very impressive sisters. I found it hard enough. But growing up with the Son of God in your home, very interesting, physically close to Jesus, day by day by day, James is clear it gave him no spiritual insight whatsoever.

He watched the life of Jesus at close quarters. He heard the words of Jesus. But there was no change in James. And I think that helps explain why throughout this letter, James is so against half-hearted, superficial faith.

From beginning to end, the book of James exposes all the games and charades of faith that we play. And again and again and again, he says that friendship with God and friendship with the world are utterly incompatible.

And the reason is because he was that man. He saw and he heard what Jesus did. But it wasn't until he rose from the dead that James came to believe.

And those famous words in chapter 1, verse 22, which you've all heard where James says, Be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. He knows exactly what he's talking about.

[3 : 32] He's talking about himself there. So when he introduces himself as a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, they're very significant words.

And servant is the word slave. And he calls Jesus Lord, this one he grew up with. He now says he is the absolute master and I have unwavering allegiance to him.

And we know through the rest of the New Testament that this James, the half-brother of Jesus, became a towering figure in the early church in Jerusalem.

When Paul writes the letter to Galatians, James, the brother of Jesus, is the first pillar of the church in Jerusalem that he visits. In Acts 15, it's James who has the last word at the council of Jerusalem.

Gracious, clear. When the apostle Paul goes to Jerusalem for the last time in Acts 21, it's James whom he meets. He's astute, he's gentle, he's wise.

[4 : 34] And it's interesting, he just throws his name out there, James, assuming that the readers are going to know exactly who he is. And he's writing, he says in verse 1, to the 12 tribes of the dispersion.

And this is the dispersion that happened after the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 7. Remember in Acts 8, Christians scatter up through the rest of what we would now call Palestine and over to Syria and around the eastern part of the empire.

And James takes an Old Testament way of referring to all of Israel, the 12 tribes. And he says, now you are the church of Jesus Christ. You are the 12 tribes of the dispersion.

And he's writing to all churches, which is one of the reasons why this is called a Catholic epistle. All churches that live in a condition of spiritual exile.

And most commentators that I've read, and I certainly have no reason to doubt this, say, this is the earliest Christian document we have. The earliest Christian document written down that we have.

[5 : 37] I think it comes from the mid-40s, within a decade of Jesus' resurrection. And it is prior to any big theological dust-ups.

So there's no great theological debate in the book about circumcision or the temple or Sabbath. I think it's even prior to the Council of Jerusalem. This is very frustrating to commentators.

Because James doesn't deal with any major theological controversies. So there's nothing for them to really get their teeth deeply into. But he's writing to churches, and he's writing about the practicalities of the Christian life lived in a messy world.

So just imagine yourself as the first recipients of this letter. You know, the excitements of the early in the book of Acts, they're a thing of the past.

Church life has now become difficult and a bit routine, really. Because there aren't big theological issues in this letter, the churches he's writing to are basically orthodox in their beliefs.

[6 : 46] Their temptations, not false teaching so much as it is just worldliness. Falling in love with this world, playing it cool with their faith.

They still claim to have faith, but they're just not being very active in their faith. So have a read of the book this week. If you're in a small group, I know you'll be studying it. But James addresses materialism.

He addresses how we love each other, how we use our tongue. About faith in daily circumstances. Let me just show you something on the tongue here.

Turn over to chapter 3 for a moment. Look at verse 6. This will give you a flavour of James. The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell. Pretty strong, isn't it? Okay, let's come back.

[7 : 49] I just want to give you a flavour of that. Here in chapter 1, James launches right into one of the central realities of the Christian life.

And that is the trials, the temptations and the sufferings that we face. Look at verse 2. He says, Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials of various kinds.

And I'm very conscious that as a church, we come very tenderly to this passage today. We gathered here yesterday to commemorate two-year-old Samuel Cluckus' death.

And there are some of us here who are struggling with things that others would find almost unimaginable. And we struggle to understand what God is doing and what we should do and how we should do it in the face of trials.

And this little passage, verses 2 to 8, is a call from James to action. And he tells us two things. In verses 2 to 4, he tells us what we're meant to do.

[9 : 01] And then in the verses 5 to 8, how to do it. And the first few verses are about our worldview. And the second is about our wisdom. Let me show you what I mean.

This is about worldview. Let me read that verse again. Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials of various kinds.

Now, I know we're polite Canadians. But doesn't that sound ridiculous? Count it joy when you meet trials.

I mean, if you and I were writing this, wouldn't we say, count it all joy, brothers and sisters, if you avoid trials or escape trials. And when trials come, we pray for ourselves or for friends and family.

We pray for our friends and family. We pray, Lord, we ask that you would end their trial. That they wouldn't suffer. And when they meet trials, we pray the Lord would get them out of the trial as quickly as possible, which is a perfectly right and Christian thing to do.

[10:07] When someone becomes a new believer, we ask God that they would have a smooth time of it, not too many troubles. But what happens when trials do come and there doesn't seem to be any way out?

What happens when you've prayed in a trial and you just can't for the life of you see why God has brought this or what you should be doing about it? And what makes it a little bit more tense here is that the word trial is the broadest possible term for trials.

Every form of difficulty. It includes external suffering, physical suffering, emotional suffering, internal suffering. It can be persecution or food shortage.

It can be being laid off. It can be going to the doctor and getting a surprise diagnosis. It can be accidents. It can be internal temptations to sin, loneliness, grief, depression, disappointment.

All kinds of trials, he says. Count it all joy when you meet them. And that word meet means you didn't plan to have this trial.

[11:17] It's completely random. You didn't choose it. You didn't expect it. Trial has just come upon you. You haven't asked for this. And what does James say we should do?

He says we need a shift in our worldview. What I mean by that is what we really look at. He says don't just see the trial. But we need a worldview that we'll see through the trial.

Notice please, James is not commanding us to feel something. He says don't feel joy. Don't feel happy. You know, don't be happy when you're suffering.

He's not calling us to be Stoics. He doesn't say enjoy your suffering. That's masochism. He doesn't pretend everything's okay. He doesn't say pretend everything's okay and put on a happy face.

That's my temptation. Everything's fine. No, James is talking about a completely different worldview. It's the worldview of faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:24] So let me repeat. He doesn't command us to feel. He commands us to count. You see what he says there? Count your trials as joy. It's the word for consider.

To reckon. To calculate. And it's absolutely impossible humanly apart from faith in God. Because without faith in God, everything revolves around my own happiness and my own equilibrium and my own pleasure.

There's a vast difference between enjoying the suffering, which is not Christian, and counting or reckoning the total sum of the suffering as joy.

And you know, of course, joy is not that upbeat, smiley optimism. Joy is that deep confidence that I'm in the hands of the loving Heavenly Father.

It has to do with God. And Christian joy is compatible with suffering. That's quite shocking, isn't it, for those who come to James and expect to find just a series of ethical teaching.

[13:29] Counting something of joy, counting suffering as joy, is entirely unnatural for us as humans. It's an act of faith.

And the worldview doesn't look at the trial. It looks through the trial to what God is doing. This is what Moses did. Moses counted. It's the same word.

He counted. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt. Can I say, what a privilege it is to have the testimonies of brothers and sisters in this congregation who do this publicly.

It's a uniquely Christian worldview. It's not the detachment of Greek philosophy or of Buddhism. It's not just holding on for grim life in the midst of the storm.

It is serving a saviour who brought us salvation through his own grisly death. It's a shocking worldview because the Christian worldview says that suffering is completely compatible with faith.

[14:39] And in the next verse, that our faith leads to steadfastness. You see verse 3? The testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

And steadfastness is not a passive quality. It's not fatalism and just holding on. The word doesn't mean a ship tied to the anchor in the harbour in the storm.

The picture is of the ship moving forward over the waves during the storm. Continuing in the same direction. And I don't know what trials you're facing right now, but there is something that the Lord produces in you and in me that cannot come any other way but through the long pressing forward through trials.

Brothers and sisters, you see that Christian character is not just stopping and not doing certain naughty things. Christian character is three-dimensional.

It's steadfast. It's rounded. And James says even the steadfastness is not the goal in verse 4. He says, let endurance do its full work that God may make you perfect and complete and lacking in nothing.

[15:58] Which doesn't mean we'll ever be morally sinless. But it means that the direction we keep heading is toward maturity. And at this point you may say, how is it possible?

How can I possibly count trials as joy? That is just too hard for me. And James says, yes, it is.

And what we need is not just the what we should do, but we need the wisdom from God, how we should do it. So we move to the second little paragraph from worldview to wisdom.

Verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God. Literally, the giving God who gives generously to all without reproach.

And it will be given him. Most of us are quite happy to say we're weak, aren't we? And that we need strength. The current favorite word for speaking about this sort of thing is broken.

[17:04] My brokenness. James says, actually, we're fools and we need wisdom. And the way he says it at the beginning is that we all lack wisdom. And when we meet a trial, we desperately need the wisdom of God to be able to see through the trial to discern what God is doing.

To discern what the trial really is. What it consists of. And James says, how we do this is simple. We pray. We ask God.

Because the kind of wisdom that will move us through these trials only comes from God above. It doesn't come naturally to any one of us. It doesn't come from our own reflections.

It's a supernatural gift from God. I cannot tell you how helpful I have found this. In the last month, visiting the family and their various trials. It has changed my prayers for them.

Not just in the trials that God would give them strength and fortitude. But that God would give them the ability to be able to discern what the trial is. And I found it very helpful for me personally.

[18:14] When we pray for those who are really struggling. Pray that the Lord would give them the wisdom that comes from him. I heard this week, and I'm sure it's a true story, about a guy who had a foot that was very sore.

Getting sore and sore. And he couldn't walk on it. And he couldn't climb stairs. And he'd been to tests. And the doctors didn't know what was going on. A friend of his said, I know someone who had a similar thing.

And he went to his dentist. And the dentist found an abscess on his tooth. And when the abscess was dealt with, his foot was healed. And this guy went to his dentist and discovered there was a small abscess on his tooth.

And it was dealt with, and his foot was healed. I'm assured it's a true story. Whether it is or not, the point is, often in trials, we don't see what the real issue is, do we?

I don't know about you, but I get so focused on the issue at hand that I miss what God is doing. And we need God's wisdom to know how to discern and how to move forward step by step.

[19:19] Even if I can't see two steps ahead, just to see the one step ahead, surely. And this is where I have to say, wisdom's got nothing to do with brain power. It's not intellect and cleverness and savvy.

Nowhere does God promise that we will know everything or we'll know the full, total summary of what's going to happen. Wisdom is living in the fear of the Lord and turning away from evil.

It's not technical skill where you'll be able to manage yourself. It's being able to pursue the love of God and the life of faith shaped by his will. And it comes to us through prayer.

Because God is a giving God and he gives generously, without reproach, and he promises that he will give. Verse 5. Isn't that a precious verse? And I imagine a friend comes to you and they've got some money troubles.

And they say, look, I've just got a little bit of trouble with my money right now. I need a loan to tide me over to next month, please. And you're good friends and you go way back and say you give them some money.

[20:28] You discover the next week he blew it on the Super Bowl. And he comes back to you the week after and he says, look, I need more money, just one more week. And you give it to him and he blows it on something else stupid.

Now the next time he comes and asks you for cash, surely the sensible thing to do is not just to give him the cash, but to put some conditions around it, right?

And if they get into trouble and come and see you again, I think if you're anything like me, you're going to feel like reproaching them, even if you do keep giving them money. Verse 5 says, God is the opposite of that.

God gives generously. The word means simply. No conditions, no complications. And God gives to all without reproach.

He does not begrudge giving to us this wisdom. When we come to God in prayer, he doesn't say, ah, here you are again. What did you do with the wisdom I gave you last time?

[21 : 34] He doesn't begrudge giving to us. I don't know about you, but I often feel when I come to God on a special issue, I've made such a mess of things, that God has every right to say, ah, no, not you again.

Verse 5 says, God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he does not begrudge giving us, and in the Greek it's ongoing, giving, giving, giving. He gives irrespective of how well we're doing, how poorly we're doing, irrespective of guilt and blame.

He does not equivocate. He gives entirely without mental reservation or hesitation. His commitment is simple, pure, total, unreserving. And I think that is an enormous encouragement to us, particularly those who are going through trial.

It doesn't matter what we are facing. Ask God. He will give this wisdom generously without reproach. Oh, but you say, you've been reading on, there is one condition, there is one rider.

Isaiah, verse 6 and 7. Let him or her ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

[22 : 48] That person mustn't suppose they'll receive anything from the Lord. They are a double-minded man, unstable in all their ways. Now, he cannot mean that we have to work up the requisite faith.

He cannot, I mean, give James credit. You can't contradict verse 5 with verse 6, can we? I think the solution to this is the fact that there are different kinds of doubt.

There's the doubt, there's the honest, sincere, intellectual doubt, which God welcomes. Just watch the way Jesus conducts his ministry. Jesus' tenderest words and some of his most shining revelation were to people who had sincere doubts.

And he deals with them with tenderness. But if we reject or refuse what God reveals, we lose what he's revealed to us.

The word is not the usual word for doubt. The word here means divided, separated, and it refers to myself. I'm doing this to myself. I'm a person at odds with myself when I doubt.

[24 : 01] Well, let me put it to you this way. In verse 7, the doubting person is defined as a double-minded person. It's not a person going to God with sincere intellectual doubt. We're doubting the goodness of God, that he really is the God of verse 5.

I'm willing to ask God, but I'm divided in my heart. I'm not really sure I want to hear God's wisdom, because I'm not sure I will really act on God's wisdom. That's what the double-minded person does. Asks God to show the way, but there's a bit of a reservation because you are not going to follow the way when he shows it to you. And in our hearts, we pray and we say, I want to hear what God says, but I'm only going to obey it if it suits me and doesn't cut too deeply into my lifestyle.

What do you do when you pray and you find that what God says and the wisdom he gives you contradicts or calls you to repent? I think it's then we show whether we believe God is God or I am God, whether he makes the final decisions or I do.

So many of our prayers, so many of my prayers are trying to get God to do what I want him to do, rather than going to him for the wisdom that he wishes to give to me.

[25 : 19] Let me give you an example. Keep your finger in James 1 and turn over to chapter 4. Chapter 4 is about church fighting.

We'll come to it in due time. Verse 2, Here we go.

You do not have because you do not ask in prayer. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

So this is the prayer where I'm praying for more money. We'll get to it in due time. The simple truth that James is articulating in verses 6 and 7 of chapter 1, his wisdom just won't be given to us when we are double-minded.

Well, it may be given to us, but we won't be able to hold on to it. If we're holding on to sin and we're not repenting from it, we won't be able to grasp hold of God's wisdom.

[26 : 32] That's true in experience, isn't it? We see it in ourselves. We see it in others. But there's this very close relationship between this kind of doubt and sin and being double-minded.

When you backslide morally, you naturally become a doubter. If we move away from obedience to the will of God, we lose our grasp on his truth.

We begin not to see the gospel clearly because our ability to believe God's truth is closely related to our willingness to obey God's truth.

And God will give us wisdom, but we can only receive it if we're willing to surrender to his wisdom.

And I don't know about you, I think we all struggle with being double-minded.

In my own heart, I want to live for Christ, but I also want to do a whole bunch of other things. And one of the commentators I read this week very wisely said, the trouble comes with those two sides of ourselves when they come to an agreement, not to fight anymore, not to quarrel.

[27 : 37] But they have a detente, a diplomatic relationship, and they agree to not interfere with each other, a negotiated settlement. That's when our spiritual lives begin to cool. That's when we lose clarity and joy and steadfastness.

James simply tells us the truth in verse 7, that that person will become unstable in all their ways.

That is, if we refuse to go God's way, it won't just affect our prayers, we'll be unstable in all our life.

Because it's one thing to ask God for wisdom, but it's another to accept it and to live by it. So it's a punchy passage, isn't it? And it calls for decision for us again this morning.

To have a different worldview, which comes from a different wisdom from above, which looks through trials, and sees through those trials, the giving God, who is generous, who gives simply without reproaching us, and who is constantly giving, and constantly giving, and constantly dedicated to what is good and best for us, even though we may not feel it.

And that is what practical Christian faith is all about. It's looking at the world and seeing, seeing God the giver. Enduring difficulties, not because we're strong and wise, but because we know we have a Father who gives grace, who gives more grace, and more grace.

[29 : 06] Amen.