



JAMES AND THE JOY FACTORY

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Federal Way, WA
July 2, 2006*

We've been hanging out in the front of our Bibles for the last several weeks to look at the life of David. Most of that story is found in 1st and 2nd Samuel. This morning we're jumping almost clear to the other end of the Bible, where we'll find a short little book called James. We're going to spend some time looking at the main messages found in these five chapters. They are just packed with information.

In fact, they're so packed that we're not going to get to all the different ideas in this sermon series. There are too many for the time that we have. So we're going to try something new this time. In between Sundays, we're going to have worksheets available that will help you dig into some sections of James on your own. You can use them by yourself or as a discussion starter with your family. Hopefully, by the time we're through, you will walk away feeling like you have a good grasp on the contents of James.

James is quite possibly the oldest book of the New Testament that we have. Most scholars believe it was written within 30 years of Jesus' resurrection, and that it was written by none other than Jesus' brother, James. Did you know Jesus had a brother? In fact, he had several brothers and sisters. There's a verse in the Bible that talks about it. Jesus was in his hometown and people couldn't get over the incredible things he was doing. Here's what they said:

Matthew 13:55-56

Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?

If you count those names, you find that Jesus had at least seven kids in his family when he was growing up, and five of them were boys! Poor Mary. What a houseful.

Brothers can be your best friends and your toughest critics. And when Jesus was on earth, James and the others brothers weren't convinced that Jesus really knew what he was talking about. They weren't sure that he was really the Son of God. After all, they grew up in the same house with him.

But after Jesus died and rose to life again, the Bible tells us that Jesus paid a special visit to James. We don't know what Jesus said to him, but apparently that was all it took for him to become convinced, because James became one of the important leaders of the

church in Jerusalem after that. And at some point he sat down to write this letter that we're going to look at.

It's an incredibly down to earth letter. In fact, to be honest, some church scholars have not appreciated it very much. Martin Luther, who lived back around the time of Columbus, said it was a letter made of straw he thought it was so flimsy! But for as many professors who haven't liked it, there have been way more ordinary Christians who have appreciated it. In fact, James is one of the most popular books of the Bible, partly because it is so practical.

Several years ago, there was a movie that came out that starred Anthony Hopkins as this billionaire who had a hobby of reading survival guide information. He would memorize all the little interesting facts about how to start fires without matches, or how to catch fish without a pole, what plants you could eat. But when you're a billionaire, you don't really have to worry about those kinds of problems very much, because you can always buy everything you need.

Well one day, he went on a trip to Alaska, and while he was flying, his plane ran into a flock of geese in midair and crashed to the ground in the middle of the wilderness. He was miles from civilization. Suddenly, survival became a very real topic to him. And it was much different when it was his life on the line instead of some tips in a book, because now he was faced with feelings of fear and cold and hunger and pain. It was much messier and more difficult to figure out what to do. All his knowledge was great, but it had to be worked into his life situation. He had to make decisions and wrestle through how to live what he thought he knew.

Sometimes when we think about God, we can have him in one section of our brain that doesn't seem to have much to do with real life. We can all come to church on Sunday, sing a few songs and hear some verses that we tuck away in our minds. Then we go back to the rest of our lives as if they don't have anything to do with Sunday. But James refuses to let us get away with living like that. Over and over again, he points out that we've got to walk our talk. If we say we believe in Jesus, our lives better show it.

That's one of the hardest things to figure out. What does it look like for you and me to take what we know about God in our heads and hearts and bring it down to street level? How does trusting Jesus change the way I act on a daily basis? That's what James wants to show us. He doesn't leave too many areas of life untouched. He talks about going through hard times. He talks about money. He talks about talking. He talks about picking friends and praying and making decisions and getting sick. And in the end, you get the picture that James believes you really can't leave any stone unturned. Every corner of life has to do with faith.

Let's take a look at the first few verses:

James 1:1-4,12

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

You know what I like? I like the fact that James doesn't make a big deal about being Jesus' brother. If it were me, I would want everybody to know. I would say, "This letter is from Jeff, you know, the one who is Jesus' brother and who probably knows him better than anybody else in the whole wide world, the one who is the most like him because they are related, the one who should be treated with a lot of respect because he's in Jesus family and a little more special than all of you. That Jeff."

Good thing James wrote this letter and not me. Because James goes the opposite way. He makes a point of saying that he's a servant of Jesus Christ. He doesn't set himself up as Jesus' equal or Jesus' stand in. He's very humble and sees himself as a servant instead of a brother.

I don't know about you, but when I want to be taken seriously, I pull out all the stops. I want people to know why they should listen to me, why I'm an expert.

At our old church, where I led the singing, I would often be the one to close the service in prayer and dismiss people. One day someone came up to me and asked me if I was an ordained pastor. They felt that it wasn't appropriate for just an ordinary person to pray at the end of the service. Now, I knew that they were thinking the wrong way about the issue, but instead of focusing on that, I had to throw in that I was going to seminary. That satisfied them. But it missed the point completely and never addressed their error. I didn't need any extra authority to pray, other than the fact that I was serving God in that role. It wasn't my expertise that mattered.

James knows that it didn't matter if he was physically related to Jesus or not. That gave him zero real influence. What mattered was that he had decided to serve Jesus. He had made the choice to put Christ ahead of himself. And that kept the focus in the right place.

Now that section said that James was writing to the twelve tribes who were dispersed abroad. There are two ways that can be understood: One would be that he was writing specifically to Jewish Christians who had been forced out of Israel and were now living in various countries. The other possibility would be that James has taken that reference of "the twelve tribes" and applied it to the spiritual people of God.

Either way, James wasn't writing his message to people in one specific spot facing one specific situation. This is general instruction and advice that applies to everybody. We can take just as much from this letter as his original readers, because it is intended for everybody.

James wastes no time on small talk but jumps right into the serious discussion.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...

Whoa. Let's stop there for a second, because that doesn't seem to make any sense. If something is a trial, that means it's hard. When something is hard for me, it's not usually what I consider a happy thing, let alone pure joy.

It reminds me of a section out of Charlie and the Chocolate factory. Did you ever read that book? The kids are taking a tour of Willy Wonka's factory, when they come to a room that says "Square candies that look round."

Everybody stopped and crowded to the door. Charlie saw a long table, and on the table there were rows and rows of small white square-shaped candies. The candies looked very much like square sugar lumps – except that each of them had a funny little pink face painted on one side. At the end of the table, a number of Ooma-Loompas were busily painting more faces on more candies.

"There you are!" cried Mr. Wonka. "Square candies that look round!"

"They don't look round to me," said Mike Teavee.

"They look square," said Veruca Salt. "The look completely square."

"But they are square," said Mr. Wonka. "I never said they weren't."

"You said they were round."

"I never said anything of the sort," said Mr. Wonka. "I said they looked round. Now watch this!"

He took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the door, and flung it open...and suddenly...at the sound of the door opening, all the rows and rows of little square candies looked quickly round to see who was coming in. The tiny faces actually turned toward the door and stared at Mr. Wonka.

"There you are!" he cried triumphantly. "They're looking round! There's no argument about it. They are square candies that look round!"

James says good can come from bad times. The squares can look round. He's not trying to minimize our pain. He's not denying that some things are just plain hard. Not all difficulties are easy to explain. And hard times happen to everyone – not just Christians. God doesn't invent problems and throw them at us to see if we trip up. But if we have put our trust in Jesus, hardship has an additional dimension. Because along with every dark cloud that comes our way, there's a spiritual crisis point that accompanies it, and we're faced with a question: Will the bad times strengthen or weaken our faith? James

says that trials or hardships are like spiritual and emotional factories that have the capacity to produce joy.

I once had a professor redefine these trials as stress. “Consider it pure joy when you encounter stress.” That’s pretty easy to relate to. I want to hear for a minute: What causes you stress? Just shout it out.

All kinds of things create stress, and that’s what James says. He is talking about stress of various kinds, stress in all its forms.

That word that he uses, “trials” means more than just a rough time. The definition means, “putting to proof.” It is like a test.

There’s a company I’ve worked with for years that specializes in window glass that is used to help protect you if there’s a fire. The glass will stay in place even when there’s a blazing fire on one side.

Now, you need to know ahead of time whether or not the glass would actually work, so they test it. They put it in this big furnace and crank up a fire to more than 1600 degrees Fahrenheit, and they leave it going for an hour. Then they take that hot glass and blast it with cold water from a big fire hose to see if it can withstand that pressure and the shock of temperature change that might come if sprinklers in a building turn on, or fire fighters show up. It’s important to put the glass through that kind of testing, because someone’s life may depend on it working right someday.

Trials and stress are more than just difficulty: God uses them to test something. And James says that something is always our faith. It doesn’t matter what the stress is – school, job, family, friends, change, health, money – how we respond to it is a chance to see how our faith will react. Every hardship has within it an opportunity for us to react or respond.

Just this week, in my last few days on the job, my boss called me with a majorly stressful situation that had come up. It shocked her, it made her angry and it had really hurt her feelings, because it had to do with an interpersonal relationship. She was up all night feeling the stress. But she’s a Christian, and she knew this was more than a hard time -- it was a trial. It was putting to proof her faith. She was at a loss and didn’t know what to do. And she prayed, “God help me here. I don’t know what’s the right thing.”

She grabbed her daughter’s Bible, hoping to just turn to some verse for wisdom. And guess what happened? A little piece of paper fell out from between the pages that had one verse on it: “Fear thou not.” And she realized that she didn’t need to worry about the outcome of the situation. It strengthened her faith, and from that point on, she had a genuine peace about how to handle it, and she was able to work through it.

James says that when that happens, when we have an opportunity for our faith to be tested, we should consider it a pure joy. James wrote his letter in Greek originally, and

sometimes our English words just don't translate the entire meaning. When James uses the word consider, it comes from another word that means to lead or have command over.

That gives it a little different twist. James is encouraging us to take charge of the circumstances and count them a joy. They won't naturally want to go there in our brains. We have to lead our minds in that direction, to redirect what we consider a hardship into what we can also consider a cause for celebration.

James isn't saying it won't still be painful and stressful. He doesn't want us to be dishonest and say everything's fine when it's not. He just knows that in the middle of hard times there's this joy factory. What's difficult can actually produce something wonderful. Even when we're to blame for the mess, God's grace is big enough to turn it around and work through it.

Why is that? What about tough circumstances is good for us? Even if it's a chance to prove our faith, why should we be joyful about that? James explains himself a little more.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything... Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

I know I'm defining a lot of words here this morning, but when James talks about the "testing of your faith", he uses a rare word that has to do with refining silver or gold. Just like that furnace we talked about earlier, you heat gold and silver up. What that does is burn away all the impurities, so what you're left with is a more valuable form of the metal. It is pure and true.

Proverbs 17:3

*The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but the LORD tests the heart.*

When we go through testing and trials, our faith is refined. We come out the other side with a stronger and more pure faith that is worth its weight in gold. False ideas of what is important and who God is get stripped away in the refiner's fire.

James tells us that testing makes us stronger. It gives us the ability to persevere. What is perseverance? It's endurance, isn't it? Holding up under pressure. Being able to keep going past what you thought you'd be able to. Several of the junior highers took track this year, and by the end of the season, they had built up their endurance to be able to run several miles a day. When your muscles and lungs get that kind of exercise on a regular basis, it's easier to keep going. Or so I'm told.

The point is that going through tough times helps us have the power and strength to finish the race. It's a training ground. I don't want to be a Christian who caves under pressure. I want to be someone who perseveres, who endures. And guess what? God promises to never let these tests and trials get beyond what we can actually endure.

1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

The word that's translated "temptation" here is the same exact Greek word that James uses for "trial." God won't give us more than we can handle. He will give us a way to get through it.

So tough times make us stronger and help us build up our endurance. James goes on to say this:

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Trials bring perseverance, and perseverance helps us become the people we were designed to be. The trick is, we have to let it do its thing. I like the way the Message translates the verse:

James 1:4

So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

Perseverance only works when it's a process. We can't cut it short. James says we have to let it take its time.

I love chocolate chip cookies. I like most forms of sugar – cakes, doughnuts, candy. But chocolate chip cookies are the one dessert that I can't say no to. If we have a fresh batch in the house, it takes me no time at all to put away more than my share.

But I don't like waiting for them. If Karin leaves me in charge of pulling them out of the oven, I always pull them out too early. And when I go to take them off the tray, they get all squished and out of shape. They break apart. And they don't taste so great, because they're still totally gooey in the middle.

That's a metaphor for life. Because the path of perseverance is a process. We can't take ourselves out of the oven too early. We have to let the process of endurance finish if we want to reach completion.

Maybe you're in a tough job. Maybe you're fighting health issues you've fought for years. (The theologian John Calvin had constant headaches throughout his adult life).

Maybe there is tension in your relationship with somebody. Maybe you can't find any way to ever save any money beyond paying the bills. Chronic problems – the ones that go on and on and on – tend to wear us down. The flip side is that they are the very tools that can be perfecting us and helping us grow the most.

I once heard a preacher say that most of God's work is done through people who were too sick or too busy to do it. The refining process of perseverance, when it is allowed to continue, produces maturity and wholeness.

My immaturity gets pounded out of me when I learn to endure hardship. God fills up my emptiness when I walk through a tough situation holding his hand.

That's why tough times can produce joy. They center us on what's important. They show us God's faithfulness. We get to the other side and are more solid and whole than we were before we had the experience.

A few verses later, James says this:

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Personally, I don't know if the fact that stress is good for my character is enough to make me feel joyful about it all the time. If I'm honest, I think sometimes I'd prefer to keep my character flaws and not have to go through so much. But there's a promise of much more. God sees what we're going through, and he sent Jesus to earth so that one day we can get out of this tough spot and be with him where there won't be any more trials. He's going to reward us with the best possible reward: life with him forever. That's the real source of joy in all this.

I like how Paul talks about it in 2 Corinthians. Again, I'll read it from The Message version:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us.

That was a hope that slaves in the South clung to. You can hear it in the words of old spirituals like this one:

*Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord, Sometimes I don't know where to roam
I've heard of a city called heaven, I've started to make it my home.*

We've got something much better waiting for us, something that completely dwarfs our current problems.

So James is saying we can find joy in stressful times for three reasons:

1. Every time there's a trial, there's a chance to put our faith to the test.
2. The longer we endure, the closer we get to wholeness and maturity.
3. Even the longest rough patch is temporary. And the reward will be worth it.

Best of all, we're not alone in this struggle. Jesus knows what it's like to face trials. He knows what it's like to persevere. And he knows the way to find joy in the middle of pain and hardship. That's why the author of Hebrews wrote:

Hebrews 12:2-3

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The Lord's Supper, which we will celebrate in just a few minutes, is a reminder that we are walking in the steps of Christ himself when we suffer. We are walking in his steps when we persevere and see things through to the very end. And we're walking in his steps when we find the joy that comes from making it to the other side.

Dr. Tony Campolo tells the story of being in a good Friday service and hearing an old, African American preacher bring the message.

For an hour and a half he preached one line over and over again..."It's Friday, but Sunday's comin'!" He started his sermon real softly by saying, "It was Friday; it was Friday and my Jesus was dead on the tree. But that was Friday, and Sunday's comin'!" One of the deacons yelled, "Preach, brother, Preach!" It was all the encouragement he needed.

He came on louder as he said, "It was Friday and Mary was cryin' her eyes out. The disciples were runnin' in every direction, like sheep without a shepherd, but that was Friday, and Sunday's comin'!"

The preacher kept going. He picked up the volume still more and shouted, "It was Friday. The cynics were lookin' at the world and sayin' `As things have been so shall they be. You can't change anything in this world; you can't change anything. But those cynics don't know that it was only Friday. Sunday's comin'! It was Friday, and on Friday those forces that oppress the poor and make the poor to suffer were in control. But that was Friday! Sunday's comin'!"

Dr. Campolo said, "He kept on working that one phrase for a half hour, then an hour, then an hour and a quarter, then an hour and a half. Over and over he came at us, "It's Friday, but Sunday's comin'!" By the time he had come to the end of the message... he just

yelled at the top of his lungs, 'It's FRIDAY!' and all 500 of us in that church yelled back with one accord, 'SUNDAY'S COMIN!'

James says that we are living on Friday right now. We are going through the trials and hardships. They will take all shapes and sizes. But each one is a joy factory – a place we can find good in the middle of the bad. And Sunday's coming. Christ didn't stay in the grave – he rose from the dead. And someday we'll taste resurrection for ourselves. The pain will be gone. The trials will be over. And real life will have just begun.

I love the way Paul talks to the Romans. He's encouraging them not to judge each other on how they're doing. He says,

Romans 14:4

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

That tells me that the reason I will be able to persevere, the reason I will be able to stand in the end is because I'm God's servant and He will give me what I need. It's not because I'm so great that I can endure – it's because of Jesus and what he did. I don't have to try to tough it out on my own and grit my teeth and be strong. I will stand because God is able to make me stand.

It gets back to James saying at the beginning that he was God's servant. That's what made the difference. When we're his, he finishes what he started in us.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, he says, "I know what you're going through. I've walked in your shoes. And I'll walk beside you now. I will help you find joy in this heartache. I will help you keep going. And I will be waiting on the other end to welcome you home and say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your rest.'"

A few questions as we prepare:

What's your stress this morning? As you take communion, bring it to Jesus. There's an old song that says, "Leave your heavy burdens at the cross and go free, oh sinner go free." We can know freedom. We can have the strength we need. And we can find real joy, even when life is hard.

What work do I need to let God finish? Sometimes it's a struggle to let perseverance do its work on us. Maybe we're saying, "Let this cup pass from me," and we're afraid of the suffering it involves. Christ identifies with us and is ready to lend us his courage.

What still feels incomplete? Does it seem like something is missing or broken in our lives? God offers us complete wholeness, and we can ask him for whatever we're lacking.