

Why Me? Why Now?

Series on the Book of James

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Bible Text: James 1:1-4

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If you this evening could ask one question of the Lord right here right now, what would you ask? If there is a riddle of your own faith, your walk with God that you would like to present before your Redeemer, what is that? Maybe you don't understand why your life has had so much difficulty in it and you thought that the life of a believer was a life of blessing. Or perhaps you think that there is these moments in life where you just lack wisdom and you know that your Lord is the ultimate source of wisdom and you don't understand why you have these moments where you lack wisdom. Or maybe you recognize that there is way too much anger in your life, that you experience way too much conflict and you don't understand why. Or maybe you know that God is sovereign yet you know that you are supposed to plan and you struggle with that balance between what is your responsibility and what you can entrust to God. Or maybe you really struggle with getting the best out of God's Word. You love the preaching of God's Word, but when you have the Bible yourself in the privacy of your own devotions, it just doesn't seem like the Word that God speaks to you. Or maybe there are moments where you feel like the most insignificant, unrecognized member of the body of Christ and you feel like you can slip in and slip out and no one would ever notice you. Or maybe there are moments where you wonder if your prayer makes any difference at all.

Why have I proposed these questions to you? Because these are exactly the questions that James looks at. The genius of the book that we are about to look at is not that it is this amazing exposition of the theology of the gospel. That is Romans. James is Christianity at street level in all of its confusion, in all of its messiness, in all of its struggle. There is not a person in this room who hasn't struggled with his faith in some way. And the message of James is that the gospel is so expansive and sturdy and the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is so powerful that we need not avoid the hard issues of life. Praise God.

We can look at those issues in the face. We don't have to run from the questions of life. There is a real way in which James is a portrait of a struggle, the struggle of faith in this broken and fallen world.

Let me read for you again James 1:1-4.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.¹

Now if I were a Puritan preacher I would probably spend the first six months of James in the greeting. And I would do 10 sermons on James, seven on servant. Well I am not going to do that this evening. There are many James that are mentioned in Scripture. There are many content and language clues that this is James the brother of Jesus. James the son of Zebedee, his death is chronicled in Acts so we know it is not him. And he is writing this wonderful pastoral letter to Christians, Jewish Christians who have been dispersed because of persecution. These are suffering people.

And it appears that as you read this book that James is concerned about effect of that suffering on the quality of these people's walk with God. He is concerned about the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that are now creeping their way into the Church. And so he writes a very practical letter looking at those difficult issues that all of us face as we walk with God.

Look at verse two with me.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.”²

Not notice the words here, “when you encounter trials of various kinds.” Notice, it is important to notice the words of Scripture. He doesn't say if. You wish he would say if, because if he said if you could hope for an escape clause. Maybe you would be the person who would have to face trials of various kinds. Can I say this to you? There is no if in this passage. It is a when. Your heavenly Father has decided after you came to Christ for you not to disappear and immediately arrive in glory. That is not a mistake. That is an intention. And there is a reason he has you here in this fallen world. Now notice the words here. He says:

“...when you meet trials of various kinds.”³

Although James is speaking to people who are facing persecution of particular kind of trial, he is expanding this application of this experience. James wants us to understand that in some way suffering difficulty is the universal experience of every believer. All of us will face difficulty of some kind. It could be those momentary difficulties that are just the irritants of life in a fallen world or it could be those huge life transforming difficulties

¹ James 1:1-4.

² James 1:2.

³ Ibid.

where on the other side you say, “My life will never be the same.” All of us somehow, some way will face the difficulties of life in this fallen world.

Now I said to you already there is a tension here. You need to understand that you cannot separate your Savior from your trials. The theology of Scripture does not allow you to do that. Paul makes it very clear in Acts 17 that God is in careful control of the details of our experiences. He says this, that God chooses the exact place where we would live and the exact length of our days. God is in the middle of your trouble. And you can never have a biblical view of Christianity and somehow put God outside of your trouble. God is in your trouble. And so immediately that begs the question. Why would God allow this kind of difficulty into the life of his children that he says in 100 ways he loves so deeply and he loves so fully? Why? Couldn't redemption be easier? Why do we have to go through these things, the things that all of us go through, the difficulties, the disappointments, the pains, the afflictions, the suffering of life? Why?

Well notice the next phrase.

“...for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”⁴

What a power packed phrase that is. First of all he says, “For you know.” He is speaking to people who he thinks should not be surprised by what he is going to say next. If you have embraced the theology of the sovereignty of God that means that you have recognized the fact that you are not in control of your life, God is, that you don't write the story of your existence, God does, that it should not be surprising to you that God is in the middle of your trouble and he is using that trouble for some purpose. That should not be a surprise to you.

“...for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”⁵

Now it gets interesting. These difficulties are not just the passing by your doorway of irrational fate. They are tests. Now what does that word mean? When you hear the word test don't think of exams. Don't think of your schooling. Don't think of passing and failing. That is not the kind of test that is being talked about here. The test being talked about here is, in fact, a metaphor. The word is a metaphor. And it is reaching into the world of metallurgy.

You may think: What is this man talking about?

Well, stay with me. When a metallurgist mines a metal he finds it in an ore state. Ore has an intrinsic problem. That problem is called imperfections. There is imperfections I that metal that rob it of its strength and rob it of its beauty. It would make no sense whatsoever to mine a metal and leave it in its ore state. I would propose to you, if you are wearing jewelry this evening, you aren't wearing ore. Ore is not very usable and not very attractive.

⁴ James 1:3.

⁵ Ibid.

And so the metallurgist knows that he must do something that seems quite radical. He adds a catalytic agent and powerful heat, liquefying that metal and boiling those imperfections out of it so it can reach a higher state of strength and a higher state of beauty. That is exactly what James is talking about. These trials that God ordains to bring into your life are for the purpose of your refinement.

Now allow yourself to be humbled. In case you hadn't realized what the application of that means is that your Redeemer looks at you in the here and now and he sees remaining imperfection. Are you resisting that? Don't. If you don't think those exist and you are a wife, speak to your husband. If you are a husband receive the counsel of your wife. If you are children, talk to you parents. If you are a parent, talk to your children.

Clearly if you are able to reflect on this past week you know there were imperfections that were revealed in you. You didn't always say the right thing. You didn't always choose the right thing. You didn't always think the right thing. You didn't always do the right thing. In a variety of ways this week, you demonstrated your need of refinement.

Now notice it is even more specific than that. There is a particular character quality that God is working on in all of us that is essential for your growth in grace. James names it. Steadfastness. These trials of life, these difficulties of life that are the object of God's grace are meant to produce something specific in you. It is steadfastness.

Now steadfastness has two aspects to it. Here are the two aspects. It is having a fixed direction, one, and a firmness of purpose, two, no matter what. Steadfastness is steadfastness because it is steadfastness. It is that fixed direction and that practical firmness of purpose no matter what God brings into my life.

Now think about that. What is the fixed direction? God has chosen me by his grace to be part of his agenda on earth. God has chosen me to no longer live for the little purposes of self but to begin to find joy in living for the expansive purposes of the kingdom of God. I have new meaning and new purpose to my life. I get up in the morning and I get up to the big sky country of the kingdom of God. I am excited. I am enthused, because my life has eternal meaning and eternal purpose. I am part of the most significant work in the universe. Praise God.

That is my direction. And that direction then results in a firmness of purpose. That means practically I have a reason for speaking in a certain way. I have a reason for conducting relationships in a certain way. I have a reason for using my money in a certain way. I have a reason for using my time and energy in a certain way. I have a reason for thinking certain things and desiring certain things and doing certain things.

You see, this fixed direction now has colored every practical aspect of my life. I have purpose in life. If you are a believer you should never feel like you don't have purpose. Every word, every situation, every location, every relationship is now filled with

wonderful practical purpose. Jesus has called you to be part of what he is doing in everyway possible in your lives. What a wonderful call.

Now what does steadfastness mean? It means in the face of difficulty I do not abandon that direction and I do not forsake that purpose.

Now I can't work that out in myself. That part, that steadfast part is only ever the product of the operation of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and that grace comes to me—are you ready for this—in uncomfortable forms. The principle is: God will take you where you haven't intended to go in order to produce in you what you could not achieve on your own. That is grace. And we need to be comforting and encouraging one another with the theology of uncomfortable grace. Because in this time when you need to be refined often the grace of the Lord will come to you in uncomfortable forms.

That is why James says you can look at those trials and experience joy, because those trials are no longer to you a sign of God's unfaithfulness and inattention. Those trials are a sure sign of his transforming love and his amazing grace.

Now you can't look at that without reflecting on this. Isn't it true that the way you respond to difficulty will always reveal what is important to you. The way you respond to trial will always expose the true values of your heart. I wish I could say that I always have a response of deep joy to the difficulty of my life. But I don't.

This was a hard passage for me to study this week, because I had to say to my Lord, "Please forgive me, because I think very often I would rather be comfortable than holy. I would rather have a schedule that works than be refined. I would rather be affirmed by people than to live in a way that pleases you. Forgive me for many times where I am dissatisfied with your grace and I would give way to thinking that my way is better than your way."

Think about this. If your heart is ruled by comfort then you are pretty angry when you are into the second day of a family vacation that has been chaotic. That chaos is ruled by a God of grace. If your heart is ruled by power and control, you will be very discouraged and disappointed when your life seems to be out of your control. If your heart is ruled by the affirmation of the people around you, you will struggle with depression and discouragement, disappointment when you are not receiving that affirmation. I would ask you this what does the response of your heart to difficulty reveal about what is actually functionally ruling your heart? Perhaps we do not take joy in the face of difficulty because our agenda for our life is different than the agenda of our Redeemer.

How high on your value system is a life that in God's eyes is holy?

Well let's look at the fourth verse.

“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁶

Now as much as this passage is a huge comfort because we realize there is not one iota of our expertise that is out of the careful control of a gloriously gracious Redeemer, what a comfort that is. There is nothing in my life that is beyond the work of redemption. There is nothing in my life that moves beyond the arms of my Redeemer. What a huge comfort that is. But there is in this passage a call.

“And let steadfastness have its full effect.”⁷

Listen. As much as steadfastness is the work of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ it is something to which God also calls you. You see, it is only when I remain under the heat of those difficulties that I begin to receive the transforming grace that is the purpose of those difficulties.

Now here is the temptation that all of us face when we face difficulty. It really is I these three steps. First I begin to permit bad attitudes into my heart. Let me give them to you. I begin to question the goodness of God. I begin to doubt his love. I begin to wonder if he actually is as good as the Bible says he is. I begin to give myself to sort of a attitude of impatience and irritation. You know, when things aren't going well for you and you just want to kick something. You don't care what it is. You just want to kick something. There is probably more than one person who has put a hole in the wall at some point and just a burst of anger and irritation. Perhaps I give myself to envy. I begin to look at the life of somebody else and I wonder why God loves them more than they... than he loves me. I wonder what they did to achieve the blessing that they are getting. They don't seem to be that much more holy than I am. And they seem like have a much easier life.

You see, those are not the attitudes of joy. Those... I am bringing God into the court of my judgment and judging him unworthy. But those attitudes begin to move into bad habits and those bad habits are characterized by a backing away from the call of God to me. And so I reason, you know, my prayer just doesn't seem to be doing anything. If my prayer was doing something I wouldn't be going through what I am going through. So I don't pray as much. I begin to back away from my daily reading of the Word of God. I don't think it is helping me, I reason. I decide I am not going to go to my small group because it is just too discouraging to hear all those people's stories of blessing when I am going through what I am going through. I begin to give myself reason for not attending services of worship, reasons that I wouldn't have given myself before.

See, what I am doing is because I have allowed myself to question the goodness of God, I am beginning to back away from the call of God in terms of my practical direction. I am backing away from that fixed direction and that firm purpose. And what results in the long run is a level of coldness in my relationship with God that would have shocked me in the early moments of my faith.

⁶ James 1:4.

⁷ Ibid.

I begin to be comfortable with distance between me and my Redeemer. That is why James not only says that steadfastness is the gift of grace, but steadfastness is to you and to me a call.

My call to you, the Lord would say to us, is to remain steadfast even in those moments of difficulty. Why? So that this grace of testing would have its full effect. Look at the words.

“...that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁸

Isn't it wonderful to think that your Redeemer will not relent. He will not sit down. He will not quit until you absolutely are in full possession of everything he deemed to give you when he sent his Son to live and die and rise again. Isn't that amazing? There will be a day when you will stand before him and you will lack in heart and behavior no good thing. You and I will be completely and fully formed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now you know you are not there yet. I hope you know that. Let me say to you if you don't, “You are not there yet.” And so the work of refinement will go on. That means you will encounter things that you never would have chosen for your life. Those things are the result of unrelenting grace. Your Lord is a Lord of perseverant heart and life transforming grace. He is a God of grace. He is a God of grace. He is a God of grace. He is a God of grace.

And I want to say this to you this evening as we close, that you will experience the deepest and fullest of joys in this fallen world when you can look your difficulty in the face and see in the middle of those difficulties, a God of glorious grace.

Count it all joy. Your Lord is not satisfied. He will work and work and work and work in the small moments of life all the way to the huge moments of life to complete that work of transforming grace that he has begun. Be honest with him this evening. Be honest with him that you don't always remain steadfast. Be honest about the way that you question his goodness. You grow lax in your obedience. And seek once more the forgiveness that he purchased for you on the cross. Let's pray.

Thank you, Lord, for the vision that this passage gives us. Thank you that you are unrelentingly at work to complete the work that you have given us. Thank you that by grace you use working steadfastness in our hearts and, Lord, I pray that we would not only receive the comfort of this passage, but we would receive its call as well, that we would give ourselves to a fixed direction, a firmness of purpose even in the hardest moments of life looking into those moments and seeing your presence and seeing your grace. We pray this in the sweet and strong name of Jesus. Amen.

⁸ Ibid.