

As we begin this morning I want to invite you to open your Bibles, or use your electronic device to turn with me to an ancient letter, written by a man called James. If you are using the Blue Bibles—located in the seat rack in front of you—you can find our text on page 977. This morning’s sermon will be the first in our Fall series through James and I want to use the first verse as a way of entering the text.

*“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.”*

Who is this James? There are only three “James” of note in the New Testament. Two of them belonged to the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples, while the third James grew up in Jesus’ home—he was the son of Mary and Joseph. The vast majority of scholars have concluded that the author of *James* is in fact Jesus’ younger half-brother.

Since the Bible doesn’t offer a lengthy description of Jesus’ growing up years, we tend to think of Him as being an only child but the truth is that Jesus grew up in a large family. In Mark 6:3, four of Jesus’ half-brothers are named: *James, Joseph, Jude* (or Judas), and *Simon*. This same verse speaks of Jesus’ “sisters” which means that He had at least two. Added together, we can conclude that Jesus was one of at least 7 children in Mary and Joseph’s home.

If you grew up in a family with at least one brother or sister, please raise your hand. Keep your hand raised if you are one of 4 children; keep your hand raised if you are one of 5 or more; is anyone here who is one of more than 7 children? Do we have anyone with 10 or more siblings?

What’s it like growing up in a family with 7+ children? Busy? Loud? Chaotic? Fun? Everyone in everyone else’s business? It would have been much the same for Jesus and His siblings. I’ve spent the last few weeks thinking about what it would be like to grow up with Jesus as a half-brother. Truthfully, I’ve been thinking about the frustration of growing up in a family where I was constantly being compared to Jesus.

Can you picture it? Mary and Joseph sitting you down and saying, *“Why can’t you be more like your older brother, Jesus? He’s so kind and respectful, He doesn’t have to be told things twice, He’s obedient...He’s just so...perfect.”*

All perfection aside, I have an older brother and so I have some sense of what James and the others might have felt. Older siblings are always ahead...they are older after all: they stay up later, experience things before we do, new opportunities and responsibilities come to them before the rest of us. I wonder if James ever resented Jesus... for being older, or, for the sense that there was something different and special about Jesus.

James would have heard all the stories surrounding his half-brother: Mary’s miraculous pregnancy, angels singing at Jesus’ birth, and Wise Men bringing costly gifts. Younger brothers and sisters are always trying to prove themselves against the older but how does one compete against all Jesus was?

I’m speculating of course, the Bible doesn’t tell us, but we know enough about human nature to understand the comparison, competition, and insecurity that can grow up in a family. What the Bible does tell us is that Jesus was misunderstood by His own family.

Mark 3:20-21 tells us that when Jesus began His ministry of preaching and healing, His family worried about Him, thinking He had lost His mind.

John 7:2-5 tells of an occasion that took place a few years later. As the Feast of Tabernacles drew near, with thousands of Jews preparing to make the trek to Jerusalem, James and the rest of Jesus' half-brothers urged Jesus to go to Jerusalem and make a name for Himself. John recounts their mocking words, "*Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.*" John sadly concludes, "*For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*"

Did anyone know Jesus the way James did? How then could James and his brothers so misunderstand, and resent, Jesus? Family relationships can be...complicated; they were for Jesus. Growing up with the Son of God couldn't have been easy on the ego; I'm quite certain I wouldn't have been any better than James.

But something happened that forever changed the way James related to Jesus. An arrest, a sentencing, followed by a brutal death. Jesus was beaten within an inch of life and then stripped naked, paraded through the crowded streets Jerusalem, and then nailed to a cross. Crucifixion was an excruciating way to die; it was a death reserved for the lowest of the low—the ultimate in shame. *Jesus, if you had just kept your mouth shut...if you had lived a quiet life in Nazareth like the rest of us...if you let go of your crazy notion that God was using you to save the world...all of this could have been avoided.*

When did James come to understand and then believe in Jesus? In 1 Corinthians 15:3 and following, the Apostle Paul writes: "**3** *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [disciples]. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living [today]... 7 **Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me***".

After His resurrection, Jesus made a point of visiting His disciples—to encourage and strengthen them. He also appeared to James. What must that reunion must have been like? I can only imagine that when Jesus embraced His half-brother, James' resentment and unbelief, along with his shame, was washed away. Did anyone know Jesus the way James did? In that moment, James must have felt like he was seeing Jesus for the first time, but this time he was seeing more than a sibling—Jesus was the resurrected Son of God.

Let me take you back to the introduction of his letter: "*James, a servant of God **and of the Lord Jesus Christ***". James doesn't name drop; it's not, "James, half-brother of the Son of God," but "*James, a **servant [or slave] of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ***". After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, James went on to become the lead elder of the Church in Jerusalem.¹

Most scholars believe that the letter of James is the first New Testament document written, appearing less than 20 years after the

¹ Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18.

resurrection. James writes to Jewish Christian congregations who had been scattered from Jerusalem due to persecution. James himself was no stranger to persecution; ultimately, James died a martyr's death refusing to recant faith in the One who was both his half-brother, and the Lord of Life.

This morning we are going to explore vs. 2-11 together; please follow along as I read: “**2** Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3** because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. **4** Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. **10** But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. **11** For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

The verses I've just read highlight three of the primary themes that James addresses throughout the letter: (1) A Christian response to trials; (2) The source, and nature, of true wisdom; and (3) Right thinking about poverty and wealth.²

1. Let's begin where James does in vs. 2-4, *Trials, Perseverance, and Joy*.

A central tenet of the Christian faith is that God is good and loving, that He is trustworthy and faithful. I believe these truths, so do many of you, but as we journey through life these truths are tested. I don't pretend to know the trials you have walked through, or what you are facing at present; what I do know is that when the trial comes, so too do the questions. *God, do you see this? Do you care? What are doing?*

One author writes, “it is an all-too-often repeated fact that [the] faith...we possess collapses before the storm of sorrow, or pain, or disappointment... We say we believe God is our Father, but as long as we remain untested on the point, our belief falls short of steady conviction. But suppose the day comes—as it does and will—when circumstances seem to mock our creed, when the cruelty of life denies his fatherliness, [when] his silence calls into question his almightiness and the sheer, haphazard, meaningless jumble of events challenges the possibility of a Creator's ordered hand. It's in this way that life's trials test our faith for genuineness.”³

² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament: James*, 22.

³ J.A. Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James*,

Vs. 2 is packed with so much meaning that we really need to break it down into its components: (a) consider it pure joy, (b) when we face trials, (c) of many kinds. In order to understand and appreciate the first phrase, we really need to begin with the second and third.

James talks about “*facing*” or “*encountering*” trials and the Greek word he uses—*peripito*—suggests an unforeseen and unwelcome difficulty that knocks on our front door.⁴ If you’ve ever said to yourself, “*I can’t believe this is happening to me,*” then you know firsthand what James is writing about.

The Greek word James uses for “trials”—*peirasmois*—has a broad application. It can be used to describe *daily trials* like losing one’s job, a health crisis, or a broken relationship; *internal trials* like the temptation to anger, greed, or pride; but it also extends to *external trials* like accusation or persecution.

And so, in the face of unforeseen and unwelcome trials, we are encouraged to “consider it pure joy”. I don’t want to soften James’ words, but I do want to explain them.

In our contemporary language, the word “*joy*” has come to mean a feeling of intense pleasure or a kind of super-sized-happiness. The question is, does James use the word “*joy*” in the same way? When you are bullied at school, rejected by friends, lose your job, or lose a

loved one to cancer, are good Christians supposed to feel intense pleasure or a super-sized-happiness?

Biblically speaking, “*joy*” isn’t an emotion, it’s a state of being.”⁵ Scot McKnight describes joy as a “confidence in the goodness of God, [and] in God’s sovereign control of history and eternity”.⁶

And James uses the word “consider,” *consider* it pure joy—“consider” is a “thinking” verb, not a “feeling” verb. In other words, James doesn’t tell us *how we should feel* about the trials we face, but rather, he tells us *how we are to think* about them. In the midst of trials, when all seems dark around us, we call to mind the faithful character of God. I can still hear the words of the retired Alliance pastor, Wendall Grout, “Never doubt in the darkness, what God has spoken in the light.” He is good, loving, and present. He knows, He cares, and He’s actively at work.

When God call calls us to “*joy*” in the midst of trials, He’s inviting us into faith. Ignoring our emotions, putting on a “happy face,” or pretending things are better than they are, isn’t a part of what it means to be Christian. But we can choose to live in joy; we can choose how we *think*. We can choose to look at trials through the lens of a deep, steady, thankful, trust in God.

In pointing us to the character of God, James is saying much more

⁴ David P. Nystrom, *NIV Application Commentary: James*, 47.

⁵ Blomberg and Kamell, 48.

⁶ McKnight, 72.

than “*Don’t worry, one day the trials of life will be over,*” take a look at vs. 3-4.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3** *because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*”

James assumes that his readers **know** at least two things about the inner working of trials—(a) our faith is being tested, and, (b) our character is being formed. Difficulties, challenge, loss, they test our faith; we are forced to wrestle with what we believe about God’s character and activity. What is being tested in the trial is not primarily our courage, willpower, or strength but the genuineness of our *faith*. Will we live with a deep, steady, thankful, trust in God?

James says, “Let perseverance finish its work” because persevering through a trial isn’t an end in itself; in God’s hands, perseverance serves a greater purpose. When we trust God, and persevere in the trial, He is at work to bring us to maturity and completeness.

illus: By a show of hands, does anyone here enjoy watching reality tv shows? I regularly watch “American Ninja Warrior;” essentially it is an obstacle course game show that requires strength, agility, and endurance from its participants. While I know I wouldn’t get very far on the course, I would love to try some of the obstacles.

If you watch the show regularly, you can’t help but notice the underlying tone—the show celebrates the will to compete, the courage to persevere, and ultimately, the triumph of the human spirit. They interview participants to draw out their stories: a daughter

whose father died tragically, or a young man who donated a kidney to his best friend. These people are praised for standing on their own two feet, for overcoming obstacles, for a strength of body, mind, and will. It’s humanism plain and simple—humanity at the centre, humanity the measure of all things, it’s the idea that we can accomplish anything we put our minds to (without God).

When James praises perseverance, this isn’t what he’s referring to, and it certainly isn’t what God wants to cultivate through the trials we face. When James writes about “maturity” and “completeness,” he’s referring to gradual process of character development by which we become more like Christ. He’s referring to the inner work of Holy Spirit, cultivating the character qualities of Jesus in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now of course perseverance does not have its full effect when we stop looking to, and trusting in, God. Adversity **can** lead us to a humble and prayerful dependence on God; trials **can** reveal our limitations and provide a fertile ground for surrender to God’s purpose and plan. But it’s entirely possible to go through a trial without learning anything of value. We can come out the other side angry, bitter, or fearful. We can learn all the wrong lessons: *life is unfair, everyone’s against me, I can’t trust anyone, I’m going to look out for #1*. We decide what we will learn.

illus: Six months in our marriage, when Naomi’s 26 year old brother died, she spiralled into the depths of grief, Naomi lost her brother, and many days, it felt like I was losing her. “*Consider it joy,*” James says. Not, “You should feel a super-sized-happiness,” but, “As you face this trial, keep in mind that God is with you and for you; you can

come to Him with your pain, your grief, your questions. He will strengthen you, and He can use this loss to shape who you become.” Our experience of Nathan’s death came to be more than just profound loss; we clung to God and He did His shaping work.

So much so that these days, Naomi works as a nurse in Community Care, visiting clients in their homes, many of whom are dying. Naomi got to know one client over a period of a few months, but as the end of her life approached, this client refused to talk about death. One day Naomi asked if there was a barrier keeping her from talking about about death. “Oh yes,” she replied, “I’m afraid to die because I’ve been angry at God.”

She went on to explain that she had left faith behind in her young adult years, but when she became sick with cancer she blamed God in anger. “I’m afraid to die because there’s no way He would want me now!” Naomi reminded her that God sent His Son into the world to save us, while we were still living in active opposition to Him. It doesn’t depend on our effort or holiness, but on God’s mercy.

The change in her client was almost immediate; joy, hope, and faith appeared. Later in the conversation, she asked if Naomi would help to plan her memorial service, and when Naomi agreed, she said: “*There’s a song I’d like to be sung but I can’t quite remember it...I haven’t sung it since I was a little girl...but it has something to do with Jesus being our friend.*” In the moment Naomi drew a blank but a few days later the song came to her in the night,

“What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not

carry everything to God in prayer.” The last couple weeks of this woman’s life marked by joy—a deep, steady, thankful, trust in God.

For the past few weeks I’ve been contemplating the connection between joy, hope, and faith. We cannot know joy in the midst trial unless we are people of hope. I’m not referring to a sunny optimism that the sun will come out tomorrow; that’s not hope, that’s wishful thinking. Hope is connected to God’s character, to His promise to be with us, and to one day heal all that is wrong with us and our world.

But we cannot know this hope apart from faith. We need to know, and trust, that God is with us, for us, and at work for our good no matter where we are, or what’s happening. This faith nurtures hope, and hope produces joy...not a feeling, mind you, but a way of thinking...a deep, steady, thankful trust in God no matter the circumstances.

I’ve taken a lot of time discussing vs. 2-4, and I want to move more quickly through the next two sections, beginning with vs. 5-8.

2. Our Need For Wisdom (vs. 5-8): James writes, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*”

This section and the previous one are tied together by the common use of the word “lack”. God works through our perseverance to lead us to maturity, so that we are complete, “not *lacking* anything.” But when were we are blindsided by unforeseen and unwelcome trials, all too often we don’t know what’s happening, or, know what to do. God, on the other hands, sees things clearly; we need His wisdom, we need His perspective in order to persevere in faith.

The Bible differentiates between a person who is intelligent and someone who is wise. When the Bible talks about wisdom, it doesn't negate intelligence or experience but the goal of spiritual wisdom isn't knowledge—the goal is to walk in step with God.⁷ When life is dark, confusing, painful, James implores us to seek God's face, His perspective, His way.

God is the source of all wisdom and the good news is that He is the giving, generous, God. At times we might give reluctantly or out of duty, but God is a Cheerful Giver. The one qualifier in our asking is that we do so in faith (vs. 6). James isn't suggesting that we need to know in advance what God will do, and then pray; the prayer of faith is founded upon the trustworthiness of God.

If you've ever been out on the ocean, or stood on the Sea Wall on a windy day, you understand the image of a wave being blown back and forth by the wind. The image conveys a sense of instability, like a person who perpetually wavers without ever committing to God or His way. A double-minded person cannot receive God's wisdom because they are unwilling to embrace it.

3. Right thinking about poverty and wealth (vs. 9-11): As we move into the third section of our text, I want to draw attention to the thread that connects them all. The “trials of many kinds” that James talks about in vs. 2-4, that surface the need to pray for wisdom (vs. 5-8), are now given specific shape. It would seem that James is writing to Christians who are facing a particular trial—the power imbalance between rich and poor; these Christians were being exploited by wealthy, non-Christian landlords.

Again, we come back to James' words in vs. 2, “*Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds;*” here, in vs.9-11, James offers God's wisdom on poverty and wealth. To Christians who are experiencing poverty and oppression, James writes, “*Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.*”

Take pride in their “**high**” position? What does James mean? He's not arguing that material poverty is a good thing, if he were, his later command to look after the widow and orphan would make little sense. Instead, James invites these impoverished Christians to fix their minds on the glorious inheritance they have in Christ. They are, after all, sons and daughters of the King of Heaven. Furthermore, they have reason for confidence; the trial they are enduring will not be wasted. They can embrace the trial with joy knowing that God can use this trial for their good, that they may become mature, like Christ Himself

But to the rich, James speaks a very different word. Vs. 10 and 11 say, “*the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.*”

To rich oppressors who and do not lift a finger to help, James speaks about the danger of placing one's trust in wealth. Though these impoverished believers feel fragile, rich people's lives are equally fragile and transient—like flowers of the field that bloom one day

⁷ C.f. Proverbs 1:7; 9:10.

and wither the next. To delight in one's riches, or, to cherish them as a source of security, is both foolish and short-sighted.

And with this word, the introduction to James' letter comes to a close. James will have much more to say about the Christian response to trials; the source, and nature, of true wisdom; and right thinking about poverty and wealth—we'll take a closer look in the weeks that follow.

The Lord's Supper: This morning we come to the Lord's Table, with James' encouragement in mind: "*Consider it pure joy, brothers and sister, when you face trials of many kinds.*" When God call calls us to "joy" in the midst of trials, He's inviting us to into faith. We can choose to look at our trials through the lens of a deep, steady, thankful, trust in God.

And it is Jesus Himself who modelled the way for us. Listen to these words, taken from Hebrews 12, "*let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he 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 sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*"

This morning, I've already described the manner of Jesus' death. He was arrested, sentenced, beaten within an inch of His life, and then stripped naked, paraded through Jerusalem, and hung on a cross to die. Crucifixion was an excruciating way to die; it was a death reserved for the lowest of the low—the ultimate in shame.

So why did Jesus submit to this kind of death? His death was a sacrifice, for the sin of the world, to obtain forgiveness for all who turn to Him. Jesus didn't have to die in our place, He could have taken the exit ramp, but He chose to persevere through it.

How did He make it through this trial? The writer of Hebrews speaks of the joy set before Jesus; Jesus knew that the cross would secure salvation for us, for the world. *His* joy has made way for us to live in joy, hope, and faith, no matter what we are experiencing.

As we come to the Table this morning, fix your eyes on Jesus, the One who has gone before us in the trial, so that we will not grow weary and lose heart. As we come this morning, let us bring our trials and burdens to Jesus, and receive His strength, His wisdom, and joy.

"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ⁸

Instructions: At this time I want to invite the worship team to come and join me on stage, and those serving the elements to come and take their place. We will have three serving station up front, and one/two in the balcony. I'm going to invite people to come forward, row by row, beginning with the back row. As each row is served, the next row can come forward to receive.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:23-25.

For those in the balcony, those serving will begin on the left side first, and then they will bring the elements over to the right side.

As you come forward to receive, the servers will invite you to tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and then eat with thanksgiving.

Worship

Benediction: And now my dear people, with the Lord's help, may you be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. Amen.⁹

⁹ Romans 12:12