

The Blessing of Endurance

James 1:2-4

I have had to learn some new vocabulary words over the past several years, words that became increasingly common only recently. One that immediately comes to mind is the word gaslight, as a verb, or the form of the word functioning as a noun, gaslighting. And in case you are wondering, it means to manipulate or intentionally confuse someone in order to cause them to question their own perception of truth or reality. It is a form of control or even abuse, causing people to lose confidence in their own thought process, eventually thinking themselves to be crazy.

Another word, newly emphasized as a verb in a lot of public and political discourses lately, is the word weaponize. We certainly heard a lot about that in the recent presidential election cycle, with accusations of both parties that the other had weaponized the justice department. To weaponize is to take something with a good and profitable intended purpose and utilize that as a weapon, to use it in the effort to cause harm. And this word is even used with reference to the Bible, that the Bible is weaponized against people. Some people actually do that, they use the Bible to cause harm, to inflict injury as a weapon might do. Those who weaponize the Bible use it for a very wrong purpose with a very wrong intention, to beat people up, to use the Bible as a tool against them rather than the purpose God himself gives his word,

2 Tim. 3:16 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Our text this morning is one of those verses sometimes

weaponized against people, and I want to be very careful not to do that. This verse is intended by God to be of great encouragement, or great help and sustenance in the midst of the very real troubles and difficulties of life, troubles certain to come. And yet if these words are mishandled, rather than provide the encouragement and strength which God intends, they wound and condemn those who suffer, condemning them for acknowledging the reality of their suffering, as if the goal of these words is some sort of Stoic denial of hardship. Just be happy, rejoice, when you suffer. It presented merely as a command, a duty or obligation, to be happy! To rejoice, even when your world is falling apart, and any inability to express that happiness is seen as a failure, a violation of the law of this verse. Thus there is no willingness to weep with those who weep, rather they are just given pat answers, stock answer, weaponized by the very words God intended to be of great encouragement.

v.2 “...count it all joy when you fall into various trials...”

That is, of course, what the words say, so how do we gain the encouragement of those words without weaponizing them against the most vulnerable and wounded of God’s people. That is my goal this morning, after all, this is what we know of Jesus, from,

Is. 42:3 “A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench.”

And this is also what we know about Jesus, in his own words, Mat. 11:28 “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Please hear those words as we begin this morning, and with those words embedded in your soul, in that context, hear also the

words of James, with its proper encouragement that we will study, v.2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

I want to begin with this emphasis, obvious perhaps, but well worth stating. And that is,

I. THE REALITY OF TRIALS IN A FALLEN WORLD.

The reality of trials. To use Jesus’ words,

John 16:33 “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

“In the world you will have tribulation.” That’s the reality. And ultimately, it is because of sin. Adam’s sin, the first sin, the sin of our first covenant head. Prior to that first sin, everything in the world was described by God as good, very good! There was no sickness, no death, no sorrow, no trouble. It was all very good.

God had threatened Adam with the curse of death for sin, promised it really.

Gen. 2:16 “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Adam’s sin was the origin of death, the beginning of trouble. And until Jesus returns at the end of this age, trouble is the reality with which we must live. Only in the new heaven and the new earth will this be true,

Rev. 21:4 “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall

be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” 5 Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

So now the reality is simply this, there will be trials. To emphasize that further,

A. Trials are not a sign of weakness or sin.

James simply says, “when you fall into various trials.” He is not referring to God’s justice, retribution for your sins. He is not revealing his own weakness or inability, as if he were helpless to do anything about the situation. Jesus simply acknowledges the universal human reality that every single person will “fall into various trials.” “In the world you will have tribulation.”

The word for trial is actually the word for temptation, and I think that the best understanding of it is to think as broadly as possible. Trial in the sense of a struggle so great as to become a temptation, but also a test, an opportunity to exercise faith, as we will see in a few minutes. Again, the reference is not to any sign of weakness, nor even more so, no sense of any consequence for sin. It is just this, as James puts it, “when you fall into various trials.”

Some people really struggle at this point, thinking perhaps either God has failed them in permitting the trial, or that they have somehow failed God as the reason they are compelled to endure it. And neither is the point here. A trial, a struggle, any hardship in life does not reflect upon God’s weakness or failure in terms of what we call his providence. We know this about God, that all things come to pass...

Eph. 1:11 “...according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

So I go back to that simple reality of life in this age. “In the world you will have tribulation.” And, therefore,

B. Trials are not an evidence of poor faith.

In other words, it's not your fault! The struggle you endure does not mean that you have failed, that your faith has failed. The reality is simply this, “In the world you will have tribulation.” So Peter puts it this way

1 Peter 1:6 “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials.”

Then further, 1 Peter 4:12 “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.”

We have to start here, with the reality of trials in a fallen world. “Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.” Don't be alarmed. Don't be unsettled. Don't be shaken. “In the world you will have tribulation.” And in that context come the words of James' encouragement, the purpose of these verses, which is...

II. THE REALITY OF GOD'S CALLING TO PERSEVERANCE.

The New King James translates the word as “patience.” The ESV has “steadfastness.” The New American Standard has “endurance.” And those are all correct translations of a very significant Greek word. I have chosen yet another English word, perseverance. The Greek word reflects all those things. Steadfast endurance, might be the more bulky translation. The translation I have chose, perseverance, emphasizes the ultimate goal and perspective for our lives.

A. The goal of patient endurance.

In the big picture, that is what life is all about. I am not

referring to a fatalistic pessimism, but a positive goal for the whole of your life...endurance. An ultimate goal, faithfulness unto the end, ultimately unto death.

Rev. 2:10 “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

You see, this faithfulness, this patient endurance, does not deny the reality of trials, of suffering. Sometimes the sufferings are severe, and we do have cause to grieve and to weep. James is not saying “don't do that.” This encouragement regarding joy does not compel you to deny the emotional and subjective experiences of the trials of this world. The verse is not a bare commandment to rejoice, to be happy, in the midst of hardship. Rather, it is an encouragement to endure those hardships with the proper perspective and outlook, namely, perseverance. Endurance. And we have to come to terms with the universal reality of that perspective, the need for endurance. Paul compares this life to a race, a marathon race if I might add a bit of commentary to his words. And this, then, is the perspective,

1 Cor. 9:24 “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

That's what life on earth in this age is all about: run the race in such a way as to win the prize, the gold medal!

Heb. 12:1 “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so

great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

And here is what that looks like as you near the end of life, 2 Tim. 4:6 “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

So that’s the goal. You are training to run a marathon. That’s the goal. That’s the purpose. Patience, or again, patient endurance. Don’t expect anything less in life! And don’t miss the accompanying goal which James identifies,

B. The goal of spiritual maturity.

I haven’t come to the encouragement to be joyful yet, because to understand what James is saying about that joy, you have to understand what he is saying about this goal of maturity.

v.4

Don’t get sidetracked by the English word perfect, as if the meaning of that word in the Bible is always to be “sinlessness” or “sinless perfection.” The point isn’t that you are somehow to become rid of sin, which is a very discouraging proposition for anyone with a healthy and accurate self-awareness. If I proclaimed to you merely the goal of achieving sinless perfection, you should all feel immediately feel disqualified, as do I. So the word maturity is much better. It means the accomplishment of the goal, and this is a worthy goal to which we should all aspire. Spiritual maturity.

That’s the “perfect work” which is accomplished by “patience.” Your spiritual maturity. In other words, the work of God in your life has this broad objective, every one of you, the goal of being complete, whole, mature. Isn’t that a good way to look at life, with the goal of being “complete.” The goal of being “mature.” James says if you achieve that goal, you lack nothing!

What a marvelous perspective on life. I want to stimulate this desire within you, to stir up your hearts to this end, that you would desire to be mature. That God would accomplish his purpose of godliness and faithfulness in you. That you would walk with God faithfully, no matter what the circumstances of life might be. That you would confront and address every situation of life with that goal in mind, to walk with endurance, to run with endurance. To run the race!

I’m not quite sure yet what to think about turning 65 in six months, other than I have to figure out what to do about medicare. I have no sense at all of nearing the end of my own race. But compared to what I was and who I was 40 years ago, a lot of that race has already been completed. I was married and then ordained to the gospel ministry within months of each other, in 1987, and those two events have defined my life ever since. But what is it that I want to accomplish? What is it that I still want to achieve? Many people struggle with those sorts of questions because they don’t know to identify the proper answer. But James gives it to us. So does the book of Hebrews. “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Beloved, that’s what this passage is all about, that challenge. That objective. That goal. And it is the circumstances of life, especially the trials of life, that produce that endurance. That is what happens when your faith is “tested,” as James says in, v.3 “knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”

So that's what is going on in all the circumstances of your life, and especially in the trials. God is at work, God's hand is at work. Not necessarily making life easy and comfortable for you, but enabling you to persevere. It is God who enables you to endure, to obtain the goal of patient endurance. It is God who enables you to accomplish this great goal of spiritual maturity.

And now we can talk about joy,

III. THE REALITY OF JOY.

You see, James isn't simply commanding you to be happy. He isn't even commanding you to rejoice. The verb in the sentence is the word translated "count" or "consider." So with all that we've said about the goal of perseverance, this is what James says for our encouragement—count that to be of great joy and delight! Count it, consider it to be the great delight of your soul, that God would enable you to persevere in the race which he has marked out for you. That's the joy, the joy of finishing the race. Specifically, let me say it clearly, the joy is this—it is,

A. The joy of confidence in the work of God's hand.

James is not merely saying, Rejoice when things are hard! Instead, he is saying this: When trials are present, rejoice in the confidence of the work of God's hand in the midst of them. You may bear much grief, even sorrow and sadness. But count it all joy, consider the joy of realizing that God's hand is at work, just as he is at work throughout the whole of your life.

So when you fall into those various trials, this is the context in which you confront them—"that the testing of your faith produces patience." There is no other way to learn this perseverance. No other way to learn how to endure. There is only one way to learn how to run a marathon race. You practice running with endurance. Only in this race, the race of life, it is God who

enables you. It is God who tests your faith, not in some sort of attempt to cause you to stumble or fail, but the testing of bringing about the maturity of which we have spoken earlier.

The work of God's hand in your life is the work of building that endurance, the testing and training which brings about the ability to persevere, and that is a work that best takes place in the context of the hardships of life. So consider that to be your great joy, that God is testing your faith, God is purifying and strengthening your faith. Peter says so much the same thing. He writes about the power of God at work through your faith which brings about salvation, "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time," as we read in 1 Peter 1:5. Then he continues,

1 Peter 1:6 "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls."

There is the joy, the joy of what awaits as the reward for perseverance in this life in this fallen world so full of trouble. It is "joy inexpressible and full of glory." Namely, the glory of the heaven, the salvation of your soul. And that, Peter says, is the end, or the goal and purpose of your faith. So as you wait for that goal, as you anticipate that goal, as you long for that goal with all of your heart, longing to be freed from this world of trouble, count it all joy. So even if you are grieved by various trials, as you will be, count it joy to be able to live with the confidence that the work of God's hand is upon you and upon the building of your faith. For this is what you must know, and what you must be convinced of, "that the testing of your faith produces patience." You have to

be confident of that. You have to be assured of that. You have to know that, otherwise the trials of this world will be too overwhelming for most of us to bear.

This is the reality of the joy of which James speak, the development of perseverance. And in that context, it is,

B. The joys of living by faith.

That means, you don't see all the blessings of the gospel here and now. You don't receive them. You certainly don't feel them. Not now. Not in this life, not in this age, not in this world. In this world you will have trouble. But the joy of this life comes when you live not according to what you see and experience in the flesh. The joy of this life, present comes, comes with the faith to believe and to trust in what you possess now only by faith, not by sight. It is the joy of living by faith, of walking by the faith to trust in God in every circumstance. So to "count it all joy when you fall into various trials" means that in the midst of those trials, in the midst of this life, you learn what it means to live by faith, to live trusting that the promises which God has made are true, even though you can't yet see it.

v.2 "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

Let me expand that idea just a bit more with the words of Paul in Romans 5, beginning with the greatest of all hopes, namely the hope of sharing in the glory of God.

Rom. 5:1 "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God

has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

There, again, is the joy. Not just the command to be happy when hard things come to you, but the recognition of true joy that can be yours only you truly live by faith and not by sight. And I should add as a meaningful conclusion this valid and profound point, that this joy, this ability to "count it all joy when you fall into various trials," is ultimately...

C. The joy of fellowship with Jesus himself.

Because that is the experience he lived for us, for our encouragement. So count it all joy when you fall into various trials because then, in that experience, you gain a greater sense of fellowship and communion with Jesus.

Let me go back to,

Heb. 12:1 "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

That's really what it means to walk by faith not by sight. It means you live life with your eyes fixed upon Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith." And walking by that faith, you realize how he lived as a man on earth, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

So we endure the cross ourselves, as it were. We endure the trials of this world, we learn to persevere in that suffering,

counting it a matter of joy to have fellowship and communion with Jesus in the experiences of his human life.

Paul learned what that was all about, writing in,

Col. 1:24 “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God.”

I always marvel at those words, because nothing was lacking in Christ’s afflictions in terms of what he was required to do to earn your salvation. But what was lacking, what was incomplete, is the fellowship with him which we would enjoy when we share in the trials of our own lives.

So this is our joy, the joy of living out our lives here and now as his children, having received what Paul calls the spirit of adoption, by which we are heirs! Heirs of eternal life, life where there will be no more trials or sorrows. So this is how you can “count it all joy when you fall into various trials,” when you are able to live by the faith expressed so confidently with these words,

Rom. 8:16 “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

So count it all joy, dear friends, whatever the circumstances of this life might be, for “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” And as you wait for that glory,

v.4 “...let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”