

INTRODUCTION:

Last Sunday Pastor Cindy began our series in James. I want to give a brief introduction to this book of the Bible. The authorship of this letter is traditionally attributed to James, the brother of Jesus, who became the bishop or the head of the church in Jerusalem. He describes himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations”. Believers in the first century—both Gentile believers as well as converts from Judaism to Christianity—were “scattered among the nations” due to persecution, but also due to the spread organic of Christianity around the Mediterranean. This letter is one of the earliest of NT documents.

READ...James 1:2-4, 12-15, 5:7-11

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

¹²Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

⁷Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! ¹⁰Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

PRAY

“Life is difficult.”

That is the first line in the book authored by M. Scott Peck, entitled ‘The Road Less Traveled’.

When the going gets tough, when life *is* difficult, have you ever felt like giving up? Sometimes things are just too hard. We doubt ourselves... we may even doubt God’s goodness. We decide to cut our losses and move on...What’s the point of it all?

Justin Cannon was feeling that way early in 2015, so he posted an online invitation that read: "Most of us have something special we'd like to do with our lives. At the Quitters Club we can help each other stomp out the brush fires set in our hearts, and get on with our lives."

Within 48 hours, 35 people had signed up online. Suddenly he was not feeling so alone anymore. (Maybe this was proof of that proverb: Misery loves company!) He had no idea if anyone would show up, but come the appointed time and place, seven people gathered to constitute the first ever meeting of the Quitter’s Club. One woman was ready to cast aside her long-held ambition to become an actress. Same deal for a would-be writer. Another was ready to quit Washington D.C. The odd assortment of strangers was drawn together by discouragement and their sense of failure. For two hours, one after another expressed their dreams and their disillusionment.

But along the way, something surprising happened: they ended up encouraging each other to persevere! The actress, they decide, should give it a hard push for a year before tossing out her ambitions of making it on the stage. The unhappy Washingtonian should look for a new job before giving up on the city. The writer whose day job is getting in the way of her artistic pursuits should carve out time each day for her passion.

"Here we are at the Quitters Club and we're all encouraging each other to keep going," one attendee mused. "I knew that was gonna happen," Cannon says. They agreed to meet again the following month to continue in their quest to help people quit. Or, as it turns out, to keep on trying.

This is what James is doing!

In chapter one, right out of the starting gate, he talks about trouble, testing, and temptation. The crazy thing is, he says these bring opportunities for great JOY! What?! He's kidding, right?

The believers are scattered. They have experienced persecution. Suffering. Loss. Estrangement from family and friends. They may indeed feel like joining Justin's Quitter's Club. But James wants them and us to persevere.

And to do so with Joy!

Really? That's a pipe dream. No one willingly looks for trials and temptations. Those come our way by nature of the fact that we are sinful human beings. What world is James living in, to suggest that testing results in JOY?

James uses the same Greek word, *peirasmos*, translated "trial" or "temptation" or "testing", several times in chapter 1. These can be external pressures that we endure (trial/test) or the internal impulses to sin/temptation. God is not the author of either of these. However, God is always present to accompany us and see us through these times of testing.

What is the purpose of testing?

Think with me for a moment about buying a vehicle (personally I'd rather have a root canal than buy a car!). Since my mother died in an automobile accident, I feel strongly about buying a car that has been tested, that receives a high safety rating. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is just one organization that conducts a wide variety of tests on vehicles. For example, this group conducts vehicle tests that evaluate two aspects of safety: **crashworthiness** — how well a vehicle protects its occupants in a crash — and **crash avoidance and mitigation** — technology that can prevent a crash or lessen its severity. (<https://www.iihs.org/iihs/ratings>)

The purpose of the testing is not to crash cars for the sake of crashing cars! The purpose is to discover the weaknesses, so that the car manufacturers can improve and strengthen the vehicle so that it is safer for the occupants.

In a similar way, the testing or trying experiences that come our way in life, are not intended to harm us or make us “crash” (and burn)! On the contrary, this kind of testing can be used by God to develop Christ-like character in us, to help us grow spiritually, and they function to strengthen our faith.

Furthermore, while it seems absurd, **the first outcome of such testing is JOY.** What?? Yes, even in the midst of suffering one can experience the deep down foundational joy of knowing that we belong to a loving, sovereign God who will never leave us or forsake us. That is what JOY is about—our relationship with the living, loving God.

Happiness is circumstantial. That’s why Disneyland can call itself: “The happiest place on earth!” It’s about a controlled, sanitized environment where everything has a fresh colorful coat of paint and all the Disney characters come to life. Nice. But that is not the day to day world in which we live.

Joy is relational. This is why Paul and Silas could sing when in jail. Not because of their circumstances. Their circumstances sucked. They could sing because they were free from the inside out. They could sing because they knew they were beloved, free from sin and death. They could sing because of their relationship with Jesus. That is source of joy. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift from God that is not dependent on one’s bank balance, one’s career/education/background, or circumstances.

While testing or trials come from without, are unwanted and unanticipated, temptation to sin, comes from within. This is a process, described here as a slippery slope that leads ultimately to death. Later James will talk more about how to avoid temptation. There are very practical steps one can take.

1:16-18 reinforce this concept that God is very faithful to us, and we are God’s beloved. Testing and even suffering are part and parcel of being human. The point is that God can use these experiences in our lives to help us grow spiritually, and develop Christ-like character in us.

The second outcome of such testing in our Christian lives is that we develop “endurance”, which when fully developed, leads to maturity.

The word (hypomone) translated “endurance” or “perseverance” does not refer to a single, exceptional act of fortitude, but to a deeper, long lasting character component that is expressed in numerous situations. It means “active steadfastness, staying power, constancy, and a determination under adversity”. *Tenacity. Even more, it is a concept that is colored in hope! It is also a means to an end. It implies one who is mature, who lives in loving obedience to God. (*p. 48, Nystrom, NIV Commentary on James)

This maturity that James has in mind is described in v. 4 as “perfect and complete”. None of us achieve perfection—we will drive ourselves and others crazy trying to! In fact, “teleos” the Greek word so translated into English, more accurately denotes “goal” or “rightful purpose”.

In other words, James is not suggesting that we strive for some unachievable high standard. **Rather, we are to become, by the work of God’s Spirit within us, people of integrity, single-minded in our love and service of God.** This is what a fully developed, mature believer will “look like”.

James mentions some role models of those who persevered, who experienced faith under pressure. The first he mentions farmers as those who are patient, awaiting the harvest, subject to the whims of weather patterns. This is to encourage us as we wait for the Lord’s Second Advent, or return. Next he mentions “the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (5:10). I don’t know one of the OT prophets who won any popularity contests. Why? They often spoke truth to power, which meant their message was unwelcome, and in order to shut them up, they were thrown out, tortured, and in worst case scenario, killed.

Lastly he mentions Job (5:11). It is true that God was not the author of his testing—that was Satan—God allowed Job to be tested. In spite of tremendous loss, illness, and tragedy in his life, Job endured. He did not lose his faith. Ultimately God rewarded him, and “was kind to him, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy.” (James 5:11)

I am acquainted with Jerry Sittser, a professor at Whitworth University in Spokane. He is the author of numerous books but I found one personally helpful after the death of my mother in a traffic accident. Jerry’s wife home schooled

their four children, and as part of one of their projects, Jerry, his wife and children, as well as his mother-in-law ventured out on a day trip for a prearranged visit to an Indian reservation in northern Idaho. It had been a fun and educational time, and as they were heading home at the end of the day, their van was in a head-on collision, hit by a drunk driver speeding at 85 miles per hour.

In that one accident, Jerry's mother in law, his wife, and his youngest daughter died. Three generations wiped out in the blink of an eye. In addition, the other three surviving children were injured, one seriously, requiring several surgeries and months of therapy.

Lost in grief, this suddenly single parent had to keep functioning. He did so with the embrace of the campus community and his local congregation. Meals, transportation, child care, house cleaning, laundry services were provided, as well as prayer, counseling and moral support. Not just for a few weeks, but for months.

In his book, A Grace Disguised, he recounts his journey through this dark time of testing of his faith. He describes with searing honesty what it was like to be a single father, a teacher, a counselor to others while he himself was a man bereft and torn, slipping into a black hole of oblivion and often simply wanting out.

One night he had a kind of "waking dream." The sun was setting, and he was frantically chasing after it toward the west, hoping to catch it and bring it back. But it was a losing race. Soon the sun was gone, and he "felt a vast darkness closing in."

Shortly after this, his sister Diane told him that the quickest way to reach the sun is not to go west but instead to head east, to move fully "into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise."

It was a counterintuitive insight that helped Sittser find a road to recovery: "I discovered in that moment that I had the power to choose the direction my life would head....I decided from that point on to walk into the darkness rather than try to outrun it, to let my experience of loss take me on a journey wherever it would lead, and to allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it."

Jerry Sittser was a man of deep faith before this accident. He remains so today. However his faith was profoundly tested. He discovered anew the reality of God's grace, and when he could not muster the strength to hold on, others held onto him, and ushered him before the Throne of Grace. He would not join Justin's Quitter's Club. No doubt there were days when he wanted to, but the community of faith believed for and with him. When he was weak, they were strong for him. When he wanted to give up, they carried him. And not only did he and his children survive, but their faith is ever more mature and stronger for it today.

I'm familiar with some of your stories of testing...of trying times...not only are you survivors, you are "thrive-ors"—those who have faithfully endured and persevered.

The author Hebrews tells us that Jesus is not unable to empathize with us because Jesus has lived in our skin...Jesus also experienced testing and temptation, yet remained without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Right there, we are reminded that we have a God who walks in our shoes, who's gone before us, who knows exactly what it's like to face trials, who knows exactly what it's like to face difficulties, who had no other agenda every day except doing the will of the Father.

Jesus has been down the road of testing, of trials, of loss, discouragement, and yes, even death. Jesus walked faithfully in our shoes, so he always knows what we're going through. He's always been there. There's no other God like this. What a powerful way to transform how we deal with life's difficulties and trials, knowing that we are not alone, but Christ has gone before us.

The same language James uses here is used of Jesus in Hebrews 12:1-3.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

²We do this **by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.** ³Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; *then you won't become weary and give up.*"

However tempted you may be to give up and quit in the face of trials and testing, don't. Don't do it. Justin Cannon discovered that all quitters needed were 1—to know they were not alone...and in that discovery; they began to encourage one another.

James tells us that God can use even the darkest days, and deepest discouragement, to develop in us Christ-like character and spiritual maturity. Faith under pressure can yield fruits of the Spirit: deep joy, and patient endurance. But these things do not happen in isolation, but in community.

Don't join the Quitters Club! Join the church of Jesus Christ—where you will find yourself in the company of those whose faith is tested, and who are walking in Jesus' shoes because he first walked in ours!