

James 1:1-4

February 2, 2020

Have you heard of Biosphere 2? It is a three acre enclosed structure down south near the Arizona town of Oracle. It was built nearly thirty years ago to simulate earth's different ecosystems. According to the website there are five different ecosystems under glass. According to their website there is—

An ocean (complete with coral reef), Mangrove wetlands (tropical swamps), Tropical rainforest, Savanna grassland and a fog desert (deserts who most of their moisture by fog). That sounds like quite a place. I don't know a lot about ecosystems and such but it sounds like that would be an ideal place to grow plants. All weather completely curated and controlled to the perfect temperature.

Ideal growing conditions.

Trees planted in these ideal conditions would grow quickly. They would gain height and girth faster than trees in the normal world. But a funny thing happened to these trees in ideal conditions. They started falling over. They would grow and grow and grow and then, "timber" fall over.

Why?

According to Mark Nelson and William Dempster,

"Rainforest (trees) grew rapidly, but trees there and in the savannah suffered...weakness caused by lack of stress wood normally created in response to winds in natural conditions."

In other words according to Columbia University,

"Wind is also necessary for creating hardy and **strong** trees. When it was first created, there was no wind inside of Biosphere. Plants grew relatively quickly, but they frequently fell over before they were of reproductive age. After some intensive observations and experimentation, it was determined that the lack of wind created trees with ***much softer wood*** than that species would normally make in the wild. They ***grew more quickly*** than they did in the wild, but ***they were harmed in the long run*** as a consequence."

They grew more quickly, but not strong enough.

It appears that Ideal conditions do not make for ideal trees. Trees not buffeted by the normal gusts of gales and gentle breezes, grew but were soft. They fell over.

Goes against all I would think—

Ideal temperature

Ideal precipitation

Ideal soil

Ideal fertilization

Ideal humidity

Everything just as it should be. It should be the recipe to grow the ideal trees.

But they fall over. What we think might be ideal conditions DO NOT make for ideal trees.

What is true for trees is also true for Christians.

We want to live protected, under glass.

We all have in our minds what our ideal life should be like.

Ideal salary

Ideal family

Ideal job

Ideal marriage

Ideal education

Everything as it should be should make for the ideal life.

Not so.

Christians without the winds of affliction blowing against them WILL fall over.

You are built through trials.

What is blowing against you?

A protracted illness

Marital tension

Single wanting to get married

A job you hate

Bullying

Feel like no one understands

You are so lonely and everyone else seems so happy

Money troubles

It could be you think if things in your life were ideal if you could just get past these troubles things would be ideal.

Not so.

Ideal conditions (or what we think to be ideal conditions) do not make for ideal Christians.

God is building you. You are becoming...

Christians, you need the winds of affliction to blow and buffet against your life in order for you to endure. I'll go further, you need sufferings of many kind in order to become who the disciple you are to be.

This is probably not what any of us want to hear—but it is the message the Bible confronts us with today. Sometimes the scriptures confront and then comfort.

That is the case today.

Your life is not supposed to be easy.

PROP: You are built through hardship.

You become who you are meant to be through hardship. This first note in the book of James sets the tone for the whole letter. The whole book is about Becoming who God has you to be.

You become you through suffering.

This may be hard to hear but we can see this from the first words James speaks. But Christian suffering is different than suffering for others. We never suffer without hope. We never suffer without reason. We never suffer just because.

We suffer because that is how the lord builds us into maturity.

You become you through suffering.

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

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:1-4

PRAY

The guide

The goal

The means

1. The guide: James

It can be tempting to scurry past the openings of epistles assuming that these words are empty platitudes. The Bible is not like other books—every word matters.

And verse 1 introduces us to our guide through the book of James—James himself.

Vs. 1,

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...”

There are three James’ in the NT, but the James who wrote this book is James the leader of the Jerusalem Church. The reason this is noteworthy is because of what he calls himself—a servant (should be rendered slave) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what?

Here is why this matters—James was Jesus’ little brother. We know James’ mom and dad—Joseph and Mary. James does not mention that he was the brother of Jesus. He does not claim for himself an exalted status, but rather a lowly one.

A slave.

And he claims an exalted status for his brother. James is a slave of God and of the Lord (Master of all things) Jesus Christ. James is a slave to God and Jesus, just the same.

That James is an slave equally to God the Father and to Jesus. In other words, Jesus and God are the same. This is a remarkable statement for James to make about his brother.

Jesus was his big brother.

Paul even tells us that after Jesus died and was resurrected, he appeared to our author.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. [6] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 1
Corinthians 15:3–7

Our guide is James, Jesus' little brother.

Why does this matter?

If there anyone who would say—Hey don't put this Jesus on a pedestal, I know him. I grew up with him. I have the dirt on him. I've seen him up close and personal not for a few weeks but for years. If there

would be anyone who could do that it would be his little brother.

And yet, Jesus' little brother calls him—Lord.

Not what you would expect. This has the ring of authenticity. I say this especially for those of you here who are skeptical of Jesus.

If the people closest to Jesus claim he was who he said he was, then it stands to reason for the rest of us to listen. James follows his brother as a slave would follow a master.

James' slave status matters to us Christians as well. If James, the brother of Jesus can call himself a slave and not expect any privileges, we ought not either. James is going to challenge us throughout this whole book. He is blunt and unapologetic. There will be times you hear things through this book you won't like.

We must not tune it out. Slaves respond and obey ALL their master's teaching.

We've met our guide, James.

Now, James gives us the goal.

2. The goal: Completion

We are going to start with the goal of suffering before we talk about HOW suffering builds Christians. We are going to see the end so that we can understand why the suffering is worth it.

Look at verse 2,

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

And here is the goal—

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

In other words, the goal is we become complete.

Do you see the logic?

Trials will build you into a sturdier Christian. More steadfast, stronger. One that does not fall over. And if you let God work through your trials you will be EXACTLY who you are supposed to be.

But, we must “let steadfastness have its full effect.” That means we can very easily decide NOT to remain

steadfast in the midst of trials. We can decide that this life of following Jesus is too hard and turn away.

We do not receive a promise that we will always understand how our trials make us complete. In fact, we won't most of the time.

"British shepherds often take sheep and rams, one by one, and throw them into a dipping trough, a huge vat filled with an antiseptic liquid. The shepherd must completely submerge each animal, holding its ears, eyes, and nose under the surface. It is of course horribly frightening for the sheep. And if any of the sheep try to climb out of the trough too soon, the sheepdogs bark and snap and force them back in. But as terrifying an experience as it is for the sheep, without the periodic treatment, they would become the victims of parasites and disease. It is for their good. One Christian writer witnessing this process couldn't help but remember that Jesus is called our Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. She wrote: I've had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor rams—I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And he didn't give me a hint of explanation. As I watched the struggling sheep I thought, "If only there were some way to explain! But such knowledge is too wonderful for them—it is high, they cannot attain unto it" (Ps 139:6)." Tim Keller

You aren't going to understand HOW you will become complete, but the text tells you that when steadfastness has its full effect THAT you will be complete.

There is nothing that tests the believer's resolve like the many life hardships that we face. When we face hardships they can demand our full attention. And sometimes our troubles are all we feel and see.

Trials have the effect of making us feel alone.

When hardships press in—here is what it feels like—it feels like God is pressed out. He seems distant. You wonder if he cares. You wonder if he sees. You wonder if he loves you at all.

Hardships do this.

But look again at verse 4,

"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you (pl) may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

At the very least, this means your trials are not for nothing. In fact, Christians see this, take this in. Trials that test your faith in God—God uses to build you into the person you are supposed to be.

Suffering in and of itself is NOT good. Rather, the effect suffering has on the people of God IS good. Do you see the difference?

This does not mean trials are not difficult.

This does not mean we should pretend they don't hurt.

Our suffering is HARD and not good.

"Suffering is not good, but it is used by our good God." Christopher Morgan

We will face kinds of suffering, but God uses them all to make us complete.

In fact, one of the ways you can tell a genuine Christian from an artificial Christian is by how they respond to trials of the hardest kind. Imperfect, but genuine Christians move closer to the Lord and his people. Artificial Christians isolate themselves from God and others.

The guide is James

The goal is completion

3. The means: trials

We are built through trials—

Verse 2,

² Count it all joy, my brothers (and sisters), when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters when (not if) you meet trials of various kinds.

When and not if.

Make no mistake—in this life you will suffer. When you face trials of what kind? Of various kinds.

What does this mean?

Trials will be a part of your life until you are with Jesus. Our broken world will batter against us until the day that we see Jesus.

We must expect trials.

I have talked to too many road-weary Christians who have heard that Christians should be triumphant and there is something wrong with you if you face a season of suffering.

That somehow you are being punished by God.

We face trials and God uses them to build us up into completion.

We follow a suffering savior.

We follow Jesus who was mocked.

We follow Jesus who was scourged.

We follow Jesus who was crucified.

When you follow a leader who suffered like that, we ought not be surprised by suffering in our lives. The message is NOT come to Jesus and your life will get so much better.

It may not. It may get worse.

But if Jesus gives us hope only for this life, we are fools of the highest order. Jesus gives us hope today, tomorrow and forever.

How are we to face to our sufferings?

Count it all joy, my brothers (and sisters), when you meet trials of various kinds

Count it joy.

This is not something I could ever tell someone to do UNLESS it is written here in the Bible. I said in the beginning that we are built through suffering.

You could get the idea that suffering is somehow good in and of itself. It is not. No suffering, no trials are good.

They are rotten.

We Christians ought not to pretend they are anything else.

But God uses them to build us into completion.

This is so very good to know. Much more hope for the Christian than those of other philosophies—

Buddhists do not deny that our lives are filled with hardships. Their answer? Get rid of all desires—when you desire nothing you won't suffer. Meditation is the act of emptying your mind and staying in the moment.

Not helpful.

Materialists say all that matters is what you feel—so do whatever you can to have a good time and

whatever you can to avoid suffering. Even if you end up hurting other people.

Not helpful.

Stoicism—which is becoming more popular—says that we can change nothing why worry about it at all. Rise above. You can't do anything about the hardship anyway. Get on with living.

Not helpful.

It is only temporary school. Epicurus the famous Greek philosopher gave the following advice: (Paraphrased Joseph Epstein)

“Forget, as best you are able, about pain. Pain is either brief, and will therefore soon enough diminish and be gone; or, if it doesn't disappear, if it lingers and intensifies, death cannot be far away, and so your worries are over here, too, for death, as we know, also presents no problem, being nothing more than eternal dark, dreamless sleep.”

None of these are very helpful.

These philosophies do not help with the real pain.

Don't hope.

Don't feel.
Don't try and understand.
Nothing matters.

It is not a universal truth that suffering produces something better in everyone—only Christians.

We have a hope. Here it is—

God uses the winds of affliction that blow against us to make us stronger. As we push against the winds that batter—we grow stronger.

So much so that James tells us to count it a joy when we suffer. NOT because we are suffering. James is not telling us to enjoy pain. He is saying we should consider it a joy because of the effects that suffering have in our lives.

Count it all joy! Joy?

That is not my 'go-to' response to suffering. You know what I am apt to do?

I moan and bemoan. I fret. I grit my teeth. I just try to hang on. I feel like I am dying inside. I might get sick. I might toss and turn in sleepless nights. I might get headaches.

How are we to face suffering?

Count it all joy.

The mill of suffering churns out strong Christians. Suffering transforms the weak into the steadfast. Trials slowly changes the fearful to the strong. Troubles builds the doubting to steadfast.

God does not endow his believers with special powers to avoid suffering—but power to go through suffering and come out better.

We can boast because God works through suffering it is another step toward completion.

When the angry winds of tribulation blow against you, getting out of bed takes a toll. Mental sanity in the teeth of hot gales of trouble is hard to come by. When—by the strength of God—we stand in against gust we begin to understand what it means to endure.

Suffering of all kinds hurts. Suffering of any kind hurts. Don't think for one moment about how you 'should be feeling.' What hurts to you might not hurt t someone else. Who cares?

Endurance is learned in the small moments of life. There are great feats of Christian endurance that are

told and retold as Christians have scoured the globe in search of people to win for Christ. Those are wonderful tales.

But most of us face normal suffering.

There are regular winds that blow against us. It is here in the daily life that the mundane becomes majestic.

What kind of sufferings?

Common fears. (Menaces of tomorrow)

Wayward children.
Wandering spouse.
Encroaching illness.
Encircling creditors.
Workplace quotas.
Departed friendships.
Debilitating loneliness.
Wholesale Depression.
Extensive Disappointment.

There are these menaces of tomorrow.

And, sometimes we suffer at the hand of other people.

A co-worker slanders you.

Wife who is gone but lives with you.
Boss who employs you but does not like you.
Mother who refuses to love you.
A wife who has left you because you love Jesus.
A confusing break-up with someone you loved.

Sometimes we are victimized and sometimes we suffer from our own hand. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy.

Drink to excess.
Think more than pray.
Isolate ourselves.
Bad husband/wife.
Bad disciple.

But suffering—even suffering we inflict on ourselves—is leading somewhere.

It is worth it. I'm not saying continue to make stupid decisions and you will get stronger. Rather, as you sin. Confess, repent and grow.

It is in the midst of the daily variety of suffering that we learn to endure. Fighting against giving up. Fighting by crying for help to God. Fighting by resolving to trust and not bolt. Fighting by praying more than you speak. Fighting by filling your mind with scripture and not venom. Fighting by resolving to

rest in Jesus heart and soul.

God gives you strength to fight one day at a time. He does not give strength for the week or the month. It is for the day, often. Sometimes for the hour.

When you fight to stand, you start to endure. And when you stand even in the face of suffering you begin to endure.

When you stand in the face of suffering and trust Jesus more than the deliverance of your suffering, you are fighting. What has begun by fighting will continue in endurance.

Winston Churchill was not a Christian by any measure. But I have a picture of him on my desk with a quote attributed to him—"If you are going through hell, keep going."

And that is the word for some of you. Keep going.

- *Your suffering is NEVER for nothing.*

Keller again in his EXCELLENT book. *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering.*

"And when we looked to the Bible to understand this deep pattern, we came to see that the great theme of

the Bible itself is how God brings fullness of joy not just despite but through suffering, just as Jesus saved us not in spite of but because of what he endured on the cross.” Tim Keller

We follow a crucified and resurrected savior.

Our suffering—even the smallest bits are never wasted.

You are built through suffering. If you are a new Christian, try this. Find a mature Christian here in the congregation—buy them a cup of coffee and ask for them to recount the hardest things they’ve lived through. And how God met them.

Suffering is NEVER for nothing.

Your suffering is NEVER for nothing, but also.

- *You are NOT going to understand why.*

Some of you are wondering—why? Why? Why? Do I have to go through all of this? If I could just understand, why? Then all would be okay.

Scripture does not often answer our Why? Questions.

Look again at verse 2,

² Count it all joy, my brothers (and sisters), when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that you will get answers to WHY everything happens
For you know that everything will make sense.

No.

³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

But that is what the Christian life is often like—

“If God were small enough to be understood, he wouldn’t be big enough to be worshiped.” Evelyn Underhill

Your suffering is NEVER for nothing.
You are NOT going to understand why.

- *Keep your eyes on Jesus.*

We do receive an answer of sorts to our suffering.
Jesus.

Our God saw our brokenness and came and suffered right alongside us. He did not remain aloft and aloof.

He came into our broken world so that the best suffering could do would be to complete us.

Do you realize the closest thing you have to hell Christians is suffering in this life?

Why?

Because Jesus suffered wrath. Jesus experienced the wrath due us. We are free to count it joy because of the effect suffering has on us because he was crushed.

He was despised and rejected by man and God.

We may be despised by men but NOT by God.

Trials may be people's attempt to tear us down—but God builds us through trials.

There are many trials that we MAY face—but many more that we will NOT.

Think of some of the trials we WON'T face.

- Abandonment by God.
- No more forgiveness.
- No more grace.
- No more mercy.
- No more strength.

- No more love.

We won't face those trials.

We can be tempted to think that our lives would be SO MUCH better if we lived under glass away from the winds of affliction.

That is not the plan.

God builds us through suffering.

PRAY

[10] And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. [11] To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 5:10–11