

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

Yesterday, I was speaking at a men's conference on the topic of suffering. After I had finished, I had a man come up to me and introduce himself. He began by telling me about his wife who has suffered from epilepsy her whole life. While she trusts the Lord, she has been left fearful, never knowing when the next attack is going to come. Another man came and shared with me how this past year has been one of the worst in his life, recounting Job-like stories that are just too hard to hear.

What I found after talking about suffering was that it opened up a floodgate for people. Lives are full of suffering. And I had already decided that I would take one week in James to pause and consider this topic, but what I hadn't expected was how much I would be impacted by these stories.

But here is the thing that struck me: conversation after conversation, men opened up about their sufferings but also shared how they were really seeking to trust in the Lord in the face of their trials. The late 19th century Baptist pastor from London, Charles Spurgeon, a man familiar with sufferings, has been supposedly quoted with these words, "I have learned to kiss the wave that has thrown me upon the Rock of Ages." So this morning I wanted to stop and consider how it is that God can produce joy in the sufferings of this life.

Faith Tested & Steadied

James says that we should count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds for we know that this is the testing of our faith. We need to understand what suffering is. A good definition is any experience that doesn't fulfill our sense of well-being & that calls into question our identity and purpose.

There can be many reasons we suffer, and suffering can be complicated and woven in complex ways. We can suffer because of wrongdoing – the wrong that we do or the wrong done to us. James is writing to a church that is suffering because they are Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. Or people suffer because they make bad choices.

But then there are natural disasters and diseases and these are not the result of some personal sin. In John 9, Jesus's disciples ask about a blind man – was he blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned. Jesus said it was neither. We live in a fallen world, and this means that we suffer because of diseases or natural disasters strike us.

Then there is the reality of spiritual conflicts. The book of Job tells us that Job suffered because God permitted Satan to test him, and he lost his wealth, his children, his home, and his health.

But sometimes these issues intersect. You can suffer because you eat poorly and have health issues. You can be foolish and build your house in a flood plain and lose everything. So suffering is not simple.

Joy in Trials – Suffering & the Christian Life

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Andrew Hall
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Yet in the face of suffering, James wants us to look at our suffering. If there is no obvious connection with sin, James wants us to look at our suffering and see how God is testing us. When God tests us, he is not setting us up for failure, like its some sneak attack. Rather, as 1 Peter 1:7 says, God tests us to purify our faith so it may be as pure as gold.

Our modern world says that almost all suffering is bad. In the DSM V, suffering is almost always viewed as a negative. Our modern world thinks that suffering is something that must be eliminated because it challenges our ideas that we are to be happy. So anything that threatens my happiness needs to be removed from my life. Today, this idea of happiness means that we eliminate any form of speech that threatens my emotional well-being. We cut off people from our lives (“ghosting”). We think that we can solve all problems of suffering so that no one should ever have to go through what I have gone through by our modern techniques and processes.

But Martin Luther understood suffering in a different way. In reflecting on passages about suffering and trials, Martin Luther understood that there were two types of theologians: theologians of glory and theologians of the cross. He wrestled with these ideas because of his experience of *anfechtungen* – that sense of being attacked by the world, the flesh, & the devil.

Theologians of glory: there is something beautiful about humanity, that we all have choices to make, and the only way we can get back to God is if grace helps me climb the ladder to do more good than bad and get back to glory. This theology of glory is the system of all human-formed religions. It believes that God helps those who helps themselves. It makes appearances in Christianity with self-help, self-improvement, and however many steps to the better you.

But the problem with these theologians is that they have embraced a system that encourages them to boast in their effort, their success, and their good. But it also destroys the one who finds that they just don’t “have enough faith” or that their willpower is not strong enough.

Theologians of the cross: freedom doesn’t come from what we do, but what God has done for us in Christ. I cannot earn glory. I cannot improve my standing before God on my own. I need help from outside of me.

In the theology of the cross: either the cross claims me, or it does not. If the cross is my aim, then I stop pursuing glory (my glory). Instead, I can say with the apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

What looks like the end – my crucifixion with Christ and the death of myself – is actually the beginning – Christ lives in me by faith. To admit my failure is to find his success. To confess my sin is to receive grace. To be brought low is the place where I can be lifted up.

These realities make us all theologians. Some will be theologians of glory, always striving, always trying to perform, always hoping they've done enough, but never sure, never confident, never secure. But those who confess that they have failed, who die to themselves, who embrace the Son of God who loved them and gave himself up for them – these are the ones who embrace the theology of the cross and find that their death is their life, their loss is their gain, and their cross becomes their crown.

This becomes important because what God is doing in our suffering, in testing us, is he is removing the theologian of glory from within. He is killing that theologian of glory because he knows that true joy is not found in us pursuing happiness apart from him. He loves us too much to allow us to go on our own, thinking that we can find happiness. And the proof of this is that people can live without any care or idea about God, but when suffering comes, they immediately question God. Why would he allow this? Yet suffering is intended to drive us to Christ. As C.S. Lewis would say, "God whispers to us in our pleasures...but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Faith Matured

James says that the testing of our faith is to produce a steadfastness so that we may become complete and mature. How is it that God is maturing us?

If we go back to the definition of suffering that I gave, suffering threatens our well-being and calls into question our sense of identity and purpose. Modern people live believing that they are supposed to be happy. But they also live believing that they have to create their own identity and purpose. When suffering comes, it threatens that sense of self, so for the modern person, suffering has to be eliminated.

But for the Christian, James's words should cause us to stop and think. If suffering is to steady and mature us, then that means that God has his sovereign hand working for our good. God is doing something that is imperceptible to us. He knows that if he were to remove all suffering, we would have no need for him. So somehow, suffering is to rouse us to know God and depend upon him. The proof in this is that people's suffering causes them to question God's goodness and his power. The fact that people can live without reference to God, ignore him, and then all of a sudden ask how he is good or powerful means that God is rousing us from our self-reliance to depend upon him. His sovereign purposes are designed to awaken us to our need and dependence upon him.

This is what Paul said in 2 Cor. 1:8ff. Paul said that he had endured such terrible hardships that he despaired of life itself, like he had received the sentence of death. But that was so that he would not rely upon himself but on God who raises the dead so that he would set his hope in him.

You see, God himself sent his one and only Son into this world. He was not aloof from the agonies and trials. But the suffering that Jesus endured was not because he had done any

wrong, but because of our sin. He experienced injustice at the greatest level. He was falsely accused. He was condemned by the court of men. He was crucified. Yet Hebrews 12:2 says that it was for the joy set before him that he endured the cross and despised its shame. How can that be?

When we understand our identity and purpose isn't something we have to create or make but rather that our identity and purpose is given to us by God, we can see how Jesus was not threatened by the sufferings, but faced them head on. Luke says that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51). He looked at where he was going – the cross – and knew that this was his identity and purpose and mission. He went unwaveringly. His purpose was to bring many sons and daughters to glory. Yet he also knew that God would raise him from the dead and vindicate him.

And here is how we mature when we face trials. When you are in Christ, your sufferings are not intended to destroy you, but refine you. If there was any other way that God could grow you, he would (see Lam. 3:31-33). We recognize that God is sovereign. As Charles Spurgeon would say:

“It would be a very sharp & trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity.”

We look to the cross. Our identity and purpose is to be Christlike. We know that God wants us to put to death that which isn't like Christ.

We remember the resurrection. Jesus has been raised from the dead, and so will we – to a life of joy and peace

We bear each other's burdens. We don't suffer alone. We suffer as the people of God together, loving one another.

And we wait for glory. As Paul will say, these present trials are not worth comparing to the glory that awaits (Rom. 8:18).

What struck me yesterday was conversation after conversation, I heard story after story about how guys were trusting the Lord, growing in dependence upon him, and it inspired me. I am no expert at suffering – who wants that title? But I know that these sufferings are producing for us a hope that is beyond the grave. So press on! Glory awaits!