

# A Guide For Non-Conformists

## WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

The older I get, the more I realize how resilient mothers are. First, there is the challenge of carrying a baby for 9 months. For many women, it starts with nausea. Then there is the movement of the little baby inside. At first, it's an amazing experience. Then they start kicking and waking mom up in the middle of the night. Then as they grow, they press and move in ways that are uncomfortable. Then their arrival into the world is marked by hours of pain.

And what amazes me is that after that baby is born and then laid on a mother's chest, a mother can hold this little one and say insane things like, "That wasn't that bad. I could do it again. I love this little one."

All the while, any man who is in the labour and delivery room feels completely helpless. The cries of pain, the helplessness, the inability to do anything about the pain are all there. And yet, there is the man, helpless, giving support, encouraging. "You can do it honey!" "You're almost there!" "Hold my hand!"

Suffering is a real part of life. We were brought into this world in the midst of pain, and we endure pain throughout our lives. While we looked at how we should personally respond to our own suffering several times during the book of James, I also wanted to look at how we can respond to others in the face of suffering. James speaks not as a detached person who is above the suffering, but as a fellow sufferer to those who are enduring hardships. And I want us to see two ways that James helps us to respond to those suffering.

### Encourage the Sufferer

When people suffer, it is tempting to blame God. "Why is God allowing this to happen to me?" And that is a legitimate question that people struggle with. Suffering threatens our identity and purpose, and the suffering is not good in and of itself.

Instead, James says that the response to suffering should be rooted in the joy that God is always working for our good. God is working to form your identity and purpose, and one of the ways that he does that is through suffering. This point is what James is driving at in these opening verses – testing is intended to produce steadfastness in maturity – a theme we will come back to in a few weeks.

What people don't need to hear is that the trial can make them more mature. They don't need to hear the platitudes, but they need to hear how their patience is working in them, how they have grown in the face of a trial, how they've changed.

The majority of change in people comes from encouragement. And this is precisely what James does. He wants to address issues, and one of the ways that he addresses issues that these sufferers face is through encouragement. He wants them to see others who have not grumbled

### When Others Suffer – Selections in James

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and complained. He wants to give them positive examples to look to. So he reminds them of the prophets and Job. He is calling them to live out the gospel realities that Luke spoke to us about last week by being patient.

But one of the most surprising things that I have learned about suffering has been how we need the encouragement of knowing God *and* his end-time purposes. Most of the time, when people think about end times, they are thinking about things like the end of the world, how the timetable will unfold, and all of the disasters that will come.

But when James thinks about God's end time purposes in terms of how he is working. Suffering is not the end of the story. God will deal with evil. He will judge evil. He will repay evil for evil. You don't have to. So the point in 5:7-11 is that God will deal with evil and we must wait patiently.

So much of what I aim to do in preaching is connect God's end-time purposes with our present reality so that we can have hope. As we have hope, this enables us to minister to one another, encourage one another, patiently endure with one another, and love one another because there is a blessing coming for those who endure. There is a crown of righteousness. This present age is marked with suffering, but there is something far better coming.

What we need as Christians is to understand God's end-time purposes for us. Not charts about the end of the world. Not the role of Israel or the Church. Not if or when there will be a rapture or tribulation. But what are God's end-time purposes for you and me?

He is aiming to perfect you. He has something far better for you. So James gives us examples of people who suffered – prophets who were beaten and killed but held fast to the message of hope. Job, a man who lost everything and had friends tell him it was his fault, didn't throw in the towel on his faith. Instead, he endured and was blessed by the Lord.

You see, what people need when they suffer is genuine encouragement. But they need more than words. They also need us to...

## **Respond Graciously to the Sufferer**

What we don't need when we suffer are platitudes. "God works all things together for those who love him" from Romans 8:28 is true, but the timeliness of these words matter. When someone is suffering, the first thing they need isn't some little cliché. "Be warm and well fed!" This is James's point in 2:14-16. Theological accuracy is important, but it isn't the starting point.

Instead, James says that faith needs to work (see 2:14-17). There needs to be action. Throughout the NT, we are given a triage on whom we are to help. First, we care for our own families. Paul will tell Timothy that widows should not be enrolled on the church support program if they have relatives because families should first care for their own (see 1 Tim. 5:8).

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We need to be mindful of how we support our families and care for their practical needs. From children to parents, we first care for our own.

After our families, we are to care for one another in the church. The passage from Matthew about the sheep and the goats is not just doing it for those who are the least, but the least of these my brothers. This is how we show the world that we love one another and are Christ's disciples. We don't say, "If you've got a need, let me know," because that puts the burden on the person with the need. We say, "here's how I can help." Time, visits, a meal, practical helps around the house, all of these things are good.

But it isn't merely doing some good deed. It is doing it in Jesus' name. It is doing a good deed in faith, believing that by supporting someone, our act of love will strengthen them in their faith in a time of trial. It is not done out of pity, but to strengthen them in their faith. So how do we show faith through action? How is it faith to give someone food and clothing?

For some, they have taken this passage and made it all about works. You have to show your faith by helping the poor and needy. Social justice becomes the primary focus of their faith. But I want to ask, how is it faith to give someone food or clothes? A non-religious person can do that. What makes this distinctively Christian?

We have to connect these verses with what has just come before. In v. 13, James said that judgment without mercy will be shown to the one who has shown no mercy. In other words, faith acts mercifully to those in need. There is no air of superiority or pretentiousness. There is a reminder that by the grace of God I am where I am. I am not better than the person in need.

The context of James also helps us to realize that people were being asked to give out of their lack, not their abundance. This is faith. Faith is not giving out of your excess, but out of your need. Imagine that you have very little money or belongings. Someone comes to you and asks for some clothing or bread. What is the typical response? I've got to take care of myself! But it takes faith to give to someone out of your lack. Can God provide my daily bread for me if I give out of my need? Or will God forget me? This makes sense, then, why James despises favoritism. Hoping you can get influence with the rich is no faith at all – it is worldly. But showing your brother or sister mercy when they can't help you at all – that is a display of faith.

So these verses are calling us to show our faith not out of our abundance, but where we lack. Can we show mercy when we have been hurt? Can we give when it is hard to give? This is what faith looks like. And James will give two examples later on to help us see that faith gives when it means sacrifice.

Should we do work at a soup kitchen? Should we give clothes to those in need? Absolutely. But faith doesn't give out of abundance. Faith gives when it hurts, believing that God can supply all my needs according to his riches in glory (Phil. 4:19). This is why James begins and ends this section in vv. 14 and 17 with the call that faith shows itself, otherwise it is dead.

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Once we have acted, James then says that public prayer is a good thing. Later on, in chapter 5 (vv. 13ff), he will show us the necessity of prayer. Pray for those who are sick. Pray with them. Spend time with them. Hold their hand as they shed a tear. Sit and listen. Weep with those who weep.

If we are to become mature in the face of suffering, we need to understand that it is not the trial that produces maturity, but how we collectively respond to sufferers. True religion is to care for sufferers – the widow and the orphan in their distress. We do not pity people, but respect them.

Thoughtful action done in faith and prayers of faith are the ways that we can respond to the sufferer graciously.

When we think of the Lord Jesus Christ, his life was full of afflictions. He was born into scandal. He faced persecution. He was ostracized. He was despised and rejected. And ultimately, he was beaten, falsely accused, and killed. If there ever was someone who was a sufferer, it was Jesus himself.

But in the face of suffering, when nailed to a cross, when pressed, what came out of him was nothing but grace upon grace. In the darkest hours of life, he forgave those who hurled insults at him. He called his friend John to care for his mother. He loved his own to the very end.

And the result of his suffering was that he won us. Through his pain he birthed a people who are to be other-oriented in the face of suffering. He took your hell so that you never have to. And if that is how the Lord Jesus lived and died for you, can't you trust him to bring you home because of his encouragement and gracious work for you?