

Fall Retreat 2021: Saturday Evening Session

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[0 : 0 0] for many years, and you would reach the point in the book where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth as you dealt with election doctrines of grace. And so I would just kind of stop the class. Let's breathe, do some calisthenics, just get some exercise, let your mind open a little bit, settle down so we can do something like that if you start nodding off. A month ago, a young man, he's still a kid. He's just a huge, tall, big kid. And for the first time ever, he didn't sit down with his mom. He sat down. He's probably junior high at most. He came all the way, sat right at the end of the front row. And then as soon as the sermon started, he just gone and snored, snored the entire sermon. It was kind of the self-discipline of keep focused, keep focused. So there's grace even if you're snoring. Through our sessions, we began with joy in uncertainty. Because of what is certain, how much is certain, greatly certain, we can still have joy. Because of the glories we have in the gospel, we dug into that a little bit to specify and emphasize what those glories are. Because that is the foundation for all that we're looking at. In the last session, we turned and looked at that we can have joy when life is hard. Because God himself is worthy of joy. And that we can take joy in the God of our salvation. There's a responsibility to pursue joy. In this session, we continue with the theme of joy when life is hard. But we're going to add another layer to that. And that is that in hardship, we can have joy for what God is doing through what is hard. We're going to turn to James chapter 1.

James chapter 1. We'll read the first four verses. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes in the dispersion, greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect.

That you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. Now, I don't think there's any New Testament letter that begins as abruptly as this one.

Greetings. Count it all joy when you encounter suffering. He doesn't even really stop to say hello much. He doesn't get into reasons why he's thankful or how he thinks of them and how he's praying for them. It's just, hello, things are hard and you should have joy. It's very abrupt.

And I'm sure he recognized this. He wrote it down. He had the time to think through it. You wonder if he started over and scribbled it out. He's trying to find a way to get to it and then just forget. Let's just be direct. Let's go right to it.

[4 : 3 5] The Jewish believers whom he's writing to, he speaks of the 12 tribes in dispersion. He's writing to Jewish believers who, like their forefathers, had a very strong sense that those who are in covenant relationship with the Lord also will have the blessings of the Lord. That is steeped in their heritage in the culture and thinking of the Old Testament going back to the time of the Exodus, which is so prominent in their thinking. There is hardship that comes, but God brings blessing to his people. But like believers ever since then, we all discover that the difficulties we also have that don't really fade. I mean, some may pass by, but then there's others in queue waiting to jump right in.

Along with just the regular trials of life that everyone has, for these believers, they're rejected by their own culture, their own families, rejecting them because you're Jewish, you're the children of Abraham.

Why are you aligning with these followers of Jesus? And we're coming into when the persecution by the Romans would begin, which was horrible for God's people. James assumes faithful Christians, godly Christians, the ones whom the Lord loves and sings over, those Christians will meet trials and a variety of them. He says, when you will meet them. Count it all joy, when? Not perhaps. And Jesus similarly even said it stronger in John 16, 33. In the world, you will have tribulation.

We couldn't be more direct than that. And yet, within the church, there are too many that teach that if your faith is strong enough and you love God enough and your life is right enough and some are as crass to say and you give enough, then hardships can be quickly overcome and be put behind you.

That we can live without hardships, which is a very unbiblical orientation. And even if we're not under that kind of poor teaching, and even as direct as scripture is about suffering, we can just fall into the thinking of believers that if I have hardship, somehow that must mean that God's not happy with me.

[8 : 01] And we make the wrong associations and wrong conclusions. So, to our encouragement, and you, well, it's not very encouraging to say I will have trials. Well, you're gonna have them whether he says them or not. So, to our encouragement to recognize struggles and trials are not an evidence God is against you. When believers ask me at times, the things that I'm going through, these hardships, do you think God's correcting me? I just ask the question, well, should he be?

I mean, if you have sin in your life that you've been ignoring, that you're not repenting of, well, then the answer I'm gonna say is in some way yes. Because God's not gonna just let you go on and on ignoring him in your sin. So, it's not that God is out to get us, but God will discipline. God wants to pull us away. So, there is some work of God getting attention if we have just turned our back and we are secretly staying in an unrepentant state. But we should never think that the existence of struggles and trials mean God is against us.

Godliness will remove some types of hardships and trials. The stability of life, not living, addictive behaviors. There are certain troubles and burdens that living for God will remove from us, will protect us from. But then there are other kinds of struggles and trials that it will add to us.

I think of some of the businessmen in our church who, their competitors are free to break laws and cut corners and do whatever they can to maximize their business. And here's the believer saying, I can't do any of those things. And they feel vulnerable because they simply can't do that.

There are burdens that we receive by not fitting in, by swimming against the stream of culture.

[10 : 34] Sometimes there can be family members just who are angry at someone becoming a believer.

My brother dated a woman once who was, she was a relatively new Christian and her mom actually told her, I wish you were a prostitute rather than go to church.

And I met a man in Belarus a couple of years ago who said that when his wife became a Christian, she became a Christian a year or two before him.

The mother-in-law, the mother of this woman was, had a physical disability, so she couldn't get out of the house. She offered to pay him to kill her daughter.

And you're sitting here, someone really tried to do that? There are, those could be extremes.

[11 : 47] And yet, we all recognize that to be serious about God can make people feel uncomfortable. And in that uncomfortableness, how they treat us, is uncomfortable for us.

Hardship is unavoidable in a world that rejects God. And, more to the point of this passage, hardship is necessary for God to grow us.

We need a wise, meaning biblical, perspective for our trials. How do we think about them in a way that represents what the Bible actually says, what is actually in God's heart, what is his intention, what's God's agenda in this?

We need to see those things so that we are understanding our burdens properly. And James is saying part of that correct understanding, a biblical understanding of hardships, should bring joy to us.

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet trials of various kinds. Now, this doesn't mean difficulties only bring joy.

[13 : 25] That, count it all joy, has often been misunderstood. It means pure joy or our highest joy.

Count it your highest joy, meaning there are different types of joy. And the most pure and the most wondrous and highest of joys is that which we can take when we have difficulties.

We see from Jesus' own example that trials don't bring only joy. In Matthew 26, that passage of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, which is a great gift to the church.

Where Jesus says, first as disciples, my soul is sorrowful even to death. And then what serves us so well is when it speaks of Jesus going and praying, Lord, if this cup can pass, but not my will, your will be done.

And then it says, and then he went and prayed the same thing over again. And it says, and then he prayed the same thing a third time again. So we're seeing Jesus, who without sin and without any lack of faith, Jesus is faced with this overwhelming burden and trial, and it is weighing heavily upon him.

[15 : 07] We've never seen Jesus that way. So heavily that he keeps going back to pray, not because his faith is weak.

That's the evidence his faith was strong. He persisted in pursuing the Father until his heart was settled. And so even though he's saying, my soul is sorrowful even to the point of death, we know what's also in his heart and mind.

And for in Hebrews 12, it says this of Jesus, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. So even as his heart is overwhelmed, there is this like subterranean river flowing through his soul that the reason I am doing this is because it's the only way to bring them to me.

It's the only way to set free for the joy that he would gather a people for himself and his Father. God is our highest joy.

And part of maturity is cultivating that that is real for us. Very piperish thinking.

[16 : 39] He is our highest joy. And he is in our trials. And he is using them.

The one of splendor and joy is always embedded in the trials. And he is always using them.

And so whatever hurt we have, whatever brokenness it seems to bring, that is never the only thing going on in our trials.

It doesn't matter if you can see it or not. The pain, the uncertainty, the fear, that's not all that's going on.

There are things much deeper, much more wonderful going on. For the believer, everything that takes place in your life, there are no exceptions, there are no caveats.

[17 : 49] Everything that takes place in our lives is gloved with grace. Grace is in everything.

Literally, nothing touches our life without grace being a part of it. Which is the only way Paul can say what he does.

Everyone's favor promise that all things work together for good. How could that be possible if there's not grace in all things? Verse 2, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various trials.

It's not a grin and bear it. Just believe better things are out there somewhere. And just endure it.

It's not that kind of attitude. Though there may be moments when we kind of feel it that way. It's not grin and bear it.

[18 : 54] It's joy. There's more going on. I trust God enough for that. I believe in the sheer wonder, beauty, and glory of his heart and character and faithfulness.

That I know there has to be more in this. And if God really is perfect, if he is as wonderful as we say, that whatever it is that he is doing has to be wonderful.

What I often remind myself is that, and I have enough faith for this, to believe that there will be a time in eternity when I will be able to look and with full honesty be able to say, Lord, you were faithful and good there.

I believe I will be at that place. If I believe I will be at that place, then why not just jump to it now? If I'm convinced.

There's no way I'm going to be in heaven. You know, Lord, most of the time. I mean, what about then? We will be filled with the sense of his praiseworthiness in all things.

[20 : 14] So let's live with that eternal mindset. It's part of thy kingdom come. It's not only his rule over us, it's our thinking in terms of what is it to be in his kingdom.

Trials are not an evidence God is angry. And it's not God being distant. It's God being active. God who is perfect, being perfect toward us.

Verse 3, you know the testing of your faith. It produces something. Verse 4, and what it's producing, let it have its full effect that you may become perfect, complete.

Now, our natural perspectives and difficulties is something like this. The best thing is that this would go away. What do we pray?

I had a friend bring this up to me who's been on many mission trips and he would take teens. He says, what is it that we all pray for every mission trip for everyone?

[21 : 34] The first thing is, Lord, keep them safe. And as one who's been on dozens of them, I'm all for that. we are quickly thinking of those types of things.

If something difficult happens, we want it quickly to pass. And that would be the best thing God could do would be remove it as soon as possible.

That is our natural instinct of what would be good right now. Well, God's understanding what would be good right now is a little bit different.

It is that the full measure of the good I want to do be perfected. And we are, oh, Lord, I got the lesson.

No, we can go on now. We can kind of move on to something. I've got it. I've learned. In Romans chapter eight, it compares our groaning to the pains of childbirth.

[22 : 48] Now, I've been there for childbirth a few times. I don't know what it feels like, but I've heard something of what it feels like.

I've heard the groans. I've heard the cries. I've heard enough to know I never want to experience what it is.

However, no one in childbirth wants the pain to end at the expense of that child coming. You don't want to cut it short to stop the birth of what is coming.

I remember when our son, our firstborn, and my wife going through long labor and all the pain in that, and she went from the moment they put our son on her chest and she held him.

I can still hear how her voice changed. It went from all the screams of labor and pain to this soft, maternal, loving, cooing voice.

[24 : 15] Trials are hard, but every single one is temporary, and every single one is purposeful. purposeful. We have no promise that the trials of life will be removed or even reduced.

Yet, James is still telling us that life will be fruitful and it can be joyful. this joy that we have is founded on the realities that we love God and above all things, we want to be closer to Him.

And that's what He wants. And what we go through in trials is part of God bringing us near because, as we've already sung, we are so prone to wander.

And we're prone to be busy. And we're prone to be preoccupied. And we're prone even in the midst of doing the most noble things of ministry, of doing them with God following rather than leading.

trials and suffering is needed to bring us back to make us desperate for the presence of God, the nearness of God.

[25 : 52] God. And that presence really is wonderful enough to go through suffering to get there.

joy is founded not only our love for God, that we trust Him. What He is doing is praiseworthy.

just a few years ago I was in Belarus and I'd received some difficult news from home.

Bob, one of my children and a panic attack started and I could feel coming in. They can take different ways and for me a few times I've had them it not always bringing dread about my condition.

I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die. That turning toward my kids that the most horrible thing will happen. And I can remember I was alone in the room late at night and I was convinced my son would commit suicide.

[27 : 19] the panic attack just took her I he will be I will find out he's dead tomorrow. That was the reality being pressed into my mind and I can remember just laying there just saying over and over Lord Lord I trust you Lord I trust you I just kept saying it no matter what happens I will trust you till I finally fell asleep.

Now I woke to a wonderful text of grace that my fears were not true but we can trust him even in what we never want to see happen because if it does he is being good in it.

It's all he can be God can only be wonderful he can only be faithful he can only be good he can only be what his character is.

James is leading us to take on God's perspective for our difficulties God's perspective is I know this hurts but this good I'm doing my grandson who's six he had to be tested for COVID have any of you been tested?

Yeah that it's really test how far can we shove this up your nose I think that's that's what they're trying to see so you know his parents are dreading you know how he's going to handle this they know what's happening friendly nurse comes in talking with Wyatt and they know what's about to happen how unhappy he's about to be they did it not for the joy of watching him squirm and pull his head back and yell it was out of care and then when the doctor came in a couple minutes later and asked how are you feeling does anything hurt he said yeah something hurts that lady just stuck something way up my nose it hurts we believe that

[30 : 24] God is good God is true God is wise we lose sight of it it's not that we're not believing these things about God but they're not capturing our heart as often as it should part of what helps us is having this community of people who love us and can speak grace to us I spoke in the last session of preaching the gospel to ourselves and also then the community that we are speaking of gospel we're speaking of our own struggles our own hearts we are reminding each other we're sharing with each other we're listening we're praying for each other we need the rootedness and the grace reality that brothers and sisters who love the Lord bring to us there's a book it's a newer book out by

Michael Emlett who works with CCEF saints sufferers and sinners he's a counselor the book is written just for believers as you're interacting with each other you may not be a counselor but we we speak to each other in effect we bring counsel we interact and so he helps believers with other believers that every believer is a saint they're in Christ every believer has suffering and every believer has sin and he kind of helps us how do we navigate those things it's very helpful can serve you in how you engage with one another because we need to do that we need each other in these things we know and understand and how we are living for

God becomes more and more rooted it it's less passing it's less ebb and flow it becomes stronger more consistent and fills our life more and more so it becomes the norm of our life difficulties test or they prove it it reveals and purifies so we can see that we're more distracted than we might think or we're awakened to the fact that we're struggling to trust him more than we realize it's awakening us to weakness that we have and the need to be earnest and draw near trials teach us we cannot depend on ourselves and they help us seeing that walking with God is something we cannot neglect we just can't afford to enter our day without him trials are needed to become more consistent and rooted in our faith so we grow from people who are doubting

God at times to those who are worshiping him in all things we grow from people who neglect obedience to those who know submission is always the best starting place in whatever is happening we grow from those who want to get back at those who bring pain to those who want to fulfill God's agenda for people to we grow from those who may compromise to stop pain to those who focus on what would honor God in this moment we grow from wallowing in self pity to those who rejoice that God is transforming us we grow from inconsistency to someone whose life points others to Christ that's what God wants he's using trials to work toward our completion it says perfect and complete all that

God intends which Paul in making the same point in Ephesians 4 13 speaks of full maturity as the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ being complete being made perfect is to be like Christ in our character one who loves the Lord with all of our heart mind soul and strength so we we could speak of it in different ways it to to be complete and perfect is to be like Christ or another way is to be a great commandment Christian to love the Lord with all of our heart mind soul and strength to love our neighbor as herself it is to be a mature disciple maker all of those things are part of what it means to be made complete meaning that what God declares is the wholeness of life is what is increasingly taking shape like an artist who begins sketching and we begin seeing parts of it and eventually you start seeing more and more until okay

[36 : 28] I see now what they're making and eventually the full beauty of it God wants us visibly to be that measure of what he's making us so the world sees what Christ is like what God would have them to be like the question is do we view those things as being joyous is to be like Christ joyous is to be a great commandment person joyous is to be a disciple maker is that joyous to us if it's not joyous we have to ask what is our relationship with the Lord do we truly love him do we truly know him it doesn't mean we don't have any anxiety or any struggle with it but just as birth pains have a precious result so do our labor pains of growing in

Christ we we just don't like struggle yet because we're covenant people those struggles are filled with grace Peter speaks similar to James in chapter one of his epistle God caused us to be born again to a living hope to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable undefiled unfading kept in heaven for you in this you rejoice though now for a little while necessary you're grieved by various trials things a joyous perspective sees God is glorious in all that he's doing and even when we don't see what that is we tell ourselves it's true a joyful perspective it sees and believes

God's heart for us is huge and he will never betray us a joyous perspective sees we have a wonderful eternity waiting ahead a joyous perspective is seeing as God sees what he's doing where we're headed what he's like our world is filled with immense problems with pain with uncertainty and we have to live in these things it's the world we're in we have to live amidst these but we can live amidst the same things the world is in with a very different perspective a very different demeanor and that means every one of us has much to share with the world and for those maybe you're tempted to think well my gifting isn't very high and my gifting isn't a public gifting and my influence isn't much here's what you have every one of you you have sufferings and struggles and you can live in them in a way that people see there's something powerfully different in your life and that's what the world needs they need to see there's something wonderful out there there is someone wonderful out there and the power that your life can have through how you walk through what is hard can enable your life to have far more impact than people talking behind podiums there's plenty of us out there when they see those they know who are who are enduring differently the effect of that is something

God will use and you don't have to be afraid of that and and if there are bits of fear then you just tell God Lord it just feels a little scary to me and I want to be used and I don't want to be afraid and he has grace not only to use you he has grace to help you with fears he has grace to help you with the hesitations and he has the wisdom and strength to go ahead and use you anyway even if it's kicking and screaming because he knows we'll be thankful afterward God's heart is so big for you he does not want you to enter eternity without your being used he wants you to have that for all eternity the evidences that you would be used he wants that so much that for the one person we all know about who never had a chance to do a single work for

God he's allowed him to forever see the impact of his life the thief on the cross remember me never had a chance to do anything for God and yet because his heart was for him in that suffering God gave him this wondrous gift that testimony is heard and known by generations and generations of God's people who have been encouraged and helped because God wants you to be with him knowing he used you and knowing you were a part of what he was doing and there is nothing even close to as good as that our heavenly father we ask that you would bring to us the convictions we need the confidences we need the clarity we need for each one here give the grace for what they are in to see what you say is true to believe it and that you would give them the gift of increasing joy in it that they would be able to see they can live joyfully amidst these burdens help them give them a taste of that by your grace in

[44 : 13] Jesus name amen