



Consider It All Joy ... You've Got to Be Crazy!
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It's easy to talk about faith and joy on a Sunday morning, inside the church, when the sun is shining on a beautiful day. It's a lot harder in the ER or at the funeral home. In my years as a pastor, I've sat with a lot of hurting people, trying to comfort them and help them hang on to their faith. There was a 6-month period of time in Atlanta when I had to do this four times.

Sharon was in her early 40's. She was the mother of three and married to the love of her life, Rob. Sharon battled lung cancer for three years. Near the end, I prayed with and sat with Rob and his children in ICU for days, until Sharon eventually died. And many of us were asking why did this happen.

Luke was a toddler and playing in the family room, near a shaky stand with a heavy television on it. Luke pulled the TV down on top of himself. I prayed with and sat with the family in ICU for four days, until Luke passed away. And many of us were asking why did this happen.

Gabby was a middle school cheerleader, popular and pretty, and a friend to everyone. One day at school, a brain aneurysm burst and Gabby was rushed to the hospital. Again, I prayed with and sat with the family in ICU for several days, until Gabby passed away. And many of us were asking why did this happen.

Trey was a handsome, out-going 24-year-old guy on a hunting trip with some buddies. At the cabin, one of the guys was careless with a handgun and accidentally shot Trey. I prayed with and sat with the family in the ER as they heard the news that Trey did not make it. And many of us were asking why did this happen.

Those were the toughest funerals I ever led, all within about 6 months. And families were asking me, "Why did God let my mom die of lung cancer? ... Why did God let that TV fall on my baby? ... Why did God let that aneurysm take my daughter? ... Why did God let that gun go off and take my son?"

My answer? I don't know.

In moments like that, I don't know. But ... I do know God. And I don't think that is an insensitive answer. I think it's the greatest answer, the most comforting answer, and the only answer. I don't know why these things happened, but I do know God. And I believe He is good, I believe He cares, and I believe He is in control. I choose to trust Him with my pain, and I urge others to trust Him with their pain.

One of the most challenging passages in the Bible is James 1:2-4. At first, it sounds insensitive. It sounds impossible. It only makes sense when read with absolute faith in the goodness and love and sovereignty of God. You've got to absolutely trust God to accept what this passage says.

“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4, NAS).

This passage was written by James, the brother of Jesus.¹ He did not believe his brother was the Messiah until after the resurrection.² But from that moment on, James was convinced and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. James wrote one of the first letters in the New Testament, and this summer are going to study his letter. “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1, ESV). “Dispersion” refers to the scattering of Jewish Christians due to persecution.³ So, James wrote this letter to encourage them to persevere, to be faithful, and to hang on their faith. James wrote about real faith for real life. And that’s why his letter is relevant to us.

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THE HUMAN REALITY OF SUFFERING

We know, by experience, that real life includes suffering. “Consider it all joy, my brothers, *when* you encounter various trials” (James 1:2).⁴ Not “if,” but “when.” Suffering is inevitable. It is unavoidable.⁵ Real life includes suffering.

Peter echoed James. “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). “Do not be surprised.” Do not think it “strange.” Suffering is inevitable and unavoidable. James referred to “various trials.”⁶ Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes.

The trial James is most certainly talking about is persecution. Referring to the “dispersion” in 1:1 sets the context of his letter. The first thing James writes about is enduring opposition for being a Christian. Again, Peter echoed James. “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you ... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Peter 4:14-16).

James and Peter were echoing what they had heard Jesus say. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:11-12, NIV).

So, when James urges us to “consider it all joy” when we encounter various trials, he is reminding us that we bring glory to God’s name when we stand with Him and when we are ridiculed in His name. Persecution is one aspect of the trials James wrote about.

THE DIVINE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

There is another reason we face trials, to grow our faith. *We trust, by faith, that there is a divine purpose in our suffering.* Sometimes we suffer because God wants to grow our faith, to

teach us trust Him more, or to discipline us and get us back on track. There is a divine purpose in suffering. It's not always obvious or understandable. Yet, there is always a purpose.⁷

“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, *knowing* that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:3-4, NAS). James 1 includes trials meant to grow our faith. The divine purpose of suffering is to conform us to the image of Christ.⁸ That we be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁹

Why does a teacher give a test to her students? Not to trick them and make them fail. A teacher gives a test to reveal what the student knows, so the student will know where they need to grow. That's why God tests our faith, to show us where we need to grow.¹⁰

Theologian J. I. Packer compared the divine purpose of suffering to a chisel. “God uses chronic pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as his chisel for sculpting our lives.”¹¹

A surgeon is willing to take a scalpel and cut a person in order to save their life. And our Father is willing to pick up the scalpel of suffering and cut us in order to grow our faith. God uses suffering ...

- *to test our faith* – The Lord led the Hebrews through the wilderness for forty years, He said, “to test you in order to know what was in your heart” (Deuteronomy 8:2, NIV).¹²
- *to build our character* – “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character” (Romans 5:3-5, ESV).¹³
- *to discipline us* – “The Lord disciplines those he loves ... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:6, 11, NIV).
- *to humble us* – “To keep me from becoming conceited,” Paul explained, “there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me” (2 Corinthians 12:7, NIV).
- *to make us long for heaven*¹⁴ – “Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18, NLT).

Joni Eareckson Tada was an active teenager who enjoyed riding horses, playing tennis, and swimming. When she was 17, Joni was swimming with some friends, and dove into shallow water and broke her neck. The accident that left her paralyzed from the shoulders down. In the first few years after the accident, Joni fought anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, and doubt in God. This summer will be her 50th year in a wheelchair. Yet, in those 50 years, she has written over forty books, recorded several musical albums, starred in a movie about her life, been an advocate for the disabled, and shared the Gospel around the world. One my top ten books of all time is her book *When God Weeps*. Joni speaks with such credibility from her wheelchair, and writes as an expert in theology and in suffering.

“Unless the Bible is wrong, *nothing* happens outside of God’s decree. Nothing good, nothing bad, nothing pleasant, nothing tragic. (Not in my life), not in yours. We may not fathom God’s reasons, we may not agree with his thinking, we may love him for it, we may hate him for it. But in simple language, God runs the world.”¹⁵

“(God) screens the trials that come to each of us, allowing only those that accomplish his good plan, because he takes no joy in human agony ... In God’s wisdom and love, every trial in a Christian’s life is ordained from eternity past, custom-made for that believer’s eternal good, even when it doesn’t seem like it. Nothing happens by accident ... not even tragedy.”¹⁶

“(God) lets us continue to feel much of sin’s sting while we’re headed for heaven. This constantly reminds us of what we’re being delivered from ... Every sorrow we taste will one day prove to be *the best possible thing* that could have happened. We will thank God endlessly in heaven for the trials he sent us here.”¹⁷

“The best possible thing”?! It takes faith to say that. David had that kind of faith. He dared to say, “My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees ... in faithfulness you have afflicted me” (Psalm 119:71, 75, NIV). Only absolute trust in the goodness and love and sovereignty of God can we believe there is a divine purpose to our suffering.¹⁸

CONSIDER IT ALL JOY

“*Consider it all joy, when you encounter various trials.*” James wrote about suffering and joy in the same sentence. Pain in one hand and joy in the other. How is that possible? How can God expect that from us? But this is what He says time and time again in His word.

- “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials” (1 Peter 1:6).
- “This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17, ESV).
- “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18, ESV).
- “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, NAS).
- Job said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” (Job 1:21).
- Job even said, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

James wrote about real faith for real life. So, I want to invite Brandon Clay to the stage to share his story of real faith for real life.

1. Welcome Brandon this morning. Brandon, and his wife Scarlett, have attended our church for almost four years. They have three children and Brandon operates his own digital marketing company. Brandon loves to teach and teaches our men’s ABF. This

morning, he is going to tell us the story of his son Knox, so let me introduce you to Knox with this short video.

2. Brandon, this is Father's Day and you have a tough story to tell. Tell us about your son Knox.
3. All of us have had our own trials, but most of us cannot imagine what this was like for you and your family. Tell us how Knox's journey affected your faith along the way.
4. Brandon, I know you. You love the Bible as much as I do. And you heard me read all those verses earlier. "Consider it all joy, when you encounter various trials" (James 1:2). "God causes all things to work together for good" (Romans 8:28). What do with those verses? As someone who loves God and His word, and who has experienced unthinkable pain, how do you accept those verses?
5. All of us have been through trials, are going through them right now, or will in the future. So Brandon, what would say to us? How do we prepare for what is coming?

This is God's word. This is God speaking to us. "Consider it all joy, when you encounter various trials." Joy is not my natural reaction to suffering, and it's not yours either. So how can we "consider it all joy" when we are suffering?

- Because God is good and loves us in everything.
- Because God is with us in everything.
- Because God has a purpose in everything.
- Because God can bring good from everything.
- Because God will ultimately save us from everything.

NOTES

¹ According to Matthew 13:55, Jesus had four brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and verse 13:56 also mentions sisters.

² See John 7:5, also 1 Corinthians 15:7.

³ Peter also wrote to those “scattered” throughout the Mediterranean world (1 Peter 1:1).

⁴ See Paul’s parallel to James 1:2 in Romans 5:3-5, also Peter’s parallel in 1 Peter 1:6.

⁵ Yet, in an attempt to soften that reality, certain myths have taken root in Christian thinking. Some say, “Once you become a Christian, God protects you from suffering ... If you’re suffering, it must mean that something is wrong in your life, you must be sinning ... Even if we suffer, having faith means our suffering won’t hurt as badly as everyone else’s.” These are myths and they’re not true. It is heresy to think that we are exempt from hard times. God never promised to protect us from pain. And James warns us that trials are inevitable.

⁶ See 1 Peter 1:6 and James 1:2.

⁷ C. S. Lewis believed that God sent suffering to warn us of the insufficiency and insecurity of this life. To make us long for more and to long for Him. Lewis said, to help us long for heaven, “(God) makes this life less sweet.” Not just less sweet, but sometimes painful. Lewis famously called pain God’s “megaphone.” [C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1940), page 95, 91.]

⁸ See Romans 8:29.

⁹ See Colossians 1:28, Galatians 4:19.

¹⁰ James MacDonald, in his book *When Life Is Hard*, “A trial is a painful circumstance allowed by God to change my conduct and my character” (page 26).

¹¹ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Glorious Intruder* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1989), page 104, quoting J. I. Packer.

¹² The same theme as James 1:3, “the testing of your faith.”

¹³ The same theme as James 1:3-4, “faith produces endurance.”

¹⁴ Joni writes, “Human suffering in this life is merely the splashover from hell ... By letting us struggle with the remnants of a sinful nature, and by letting us know pain, he reminds us of the hell we are being saved from ... When our bodies are racked with pain, the Christian should say, ‘How horrible my suffering ... but how wonderful that I am going to heaven and will be rescued from the horrible pain I deserve.’” [Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes, *When God Weeps – Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), page 197.]

¹⁵ Tada and Estes, *When God Weeps*, page 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, page 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ When life knocks the breath out of us, our faith says, “Yes, God is good. Yes, God is sovereign. Yes, God is in control.” But our feelings cry out, “Lord, where are You, and why won’t You do something?” Tragedy puts theology to the test. It always does. Berkouwer states that “raw reality assaults” our theology [Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988), page 32.]