

[1]
Making Sense of Pain
James 1:2-8
September 27, 2015, Pastor Jeff Germo

[2 - video]

[3]

For as long as I can remember I've dreamed of owning a sailboat. There is something thrilling to me about being out in the ocean and being carried along by the forces of nature. I come from the Prairies, of course, and there's not too much water on which to set sail so my dream has never been realized, but it still remains a dream. But, even in my wildest dreams, I do not imagine sailing in a storm like the one in the video. The dreams I have about sailing are in calm waters and yet somehow the wind is blowing hard enough for me to capture it in the sails and propel me along at an exhilarating rate of speed. In all of my fantastical thoughts about sailing, never once have I imagined that I would be in the high seas with the waves crashing over the boat wondering if I was going to survive...

My dreams do not include waves crashing over the boat. In my dreams, the ones I have when I'm awake anyway, everything is peaceful and nothing goes wrong. But, life is not like that, is it?

Sometimes it feels like you are in the middle of the high seas, with the breakers crashing over top of you and you try to look out into the distance to see if there is any sign of safety...any land...any clear skies, a larger vessel that can perhaps come to your rescue, but they are nowhere in sight.

And, of course, when we were children, in our youthful imaginations, we did not envisage a life of hardship, did we?

We pictured the good times. The sunny skies. The happy marriage. Kids that always behave well, and turn out just the way we plan. The nice big house with the white picket fence. Yearly vacations in the sun. And all the bills somehow getting magically paid. No pains or aches or illnesses. We didn't consider storms, waves, or breakers crashing into the side of what we imagined would be our well-ordered life.

We grew up and reality hit us hard. The waters are not always calm. The sun does not always shine - in Campbell River. And we have learned that we cannot predict when the storms will come, ... but come they do.

Pain is a part of life that we do not welcome or enjoy, but it is an inevitable part of life. None of us are immune to it. Jesus actually said very clearly that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33).

A couple weeks ago we began our new series on the Epistle of James. The series is entitled, ***"Faith that Works."*** I suggested that you read through James several times in one sitting. I'm sure if I asked you, many of you would have an idea of the major theme in the letter. What I see in James, after reading through it many times is that it is all about maturity. All through the letter, James is basically saying, "If your faith is real it will look like this. This is what a true Christ-follower will look like."

Today we are going to look at 1:2-8. At first glance when you read these verses it looks like James is talking about three different things: suffering; wisdom; and faith. So it would seem obvious to preach three different sermons on this passage. But, really there is one thread running through these verses holding them together, and that thread is the **process** by which we mature. James calls it ***“the testing of your faith”*** in verse 3. In other words, it is about maturing our faith, or making it real.

I want you to notice in this passage that there are four steps in this process of maturity. I'll tell you what they are now, and then we'll flesh them out.

- [4]**
1. **Prepare yourself *for* trials.** v. 2
- [5]**
2. **Persevere *through* the trial.** vs. 3, 4
- [6]**
3. **Procure God's wisdom *in* the trial.** v. 5
- [7]**
4. **Purposefully trust God *with* the outcome of the trial.** vs. 6-8

Now, I mentioned in the first sermon that there are 54 imperatives in James – “Do this”, or “Don't do that.” And James begins with the most difficult one.

[8]

James 1:2 (ESV)

² Count it all joy, my brothers, [and sisters] when you meet trials of various kinds,

Count it all joy... This is the most unnatural thing God could ask from us. Some of your Bibles say, ***“Consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds.”*** Consider it joy in the middle of pain. Consider it joy when you are in the middle of a crisis. Consider it joy when you are sick. Consider it joy when people speak unkind words about you. Consider it joy when you don't how the bills are going to be paid. Consider it joy when you're worried about your kids. Consider it joy when you hate your job, but you need to work. Consider it joy when you see your ailing parents suffering. Consider it joy when you look around you and other people seem to be succeeding and being blessed by God, and yet God's blessing seems to have passed you by.

[9]

How many of us find any of that easy? I certainly don't.

Ruthie and I talk about this topic periodically. What is the purpose of pain? If there is no God, pain has no purpose. It is something to be avoided at all costs. If there is no God and we are simply a compilation of atoms that will cease to exist when we die, then there is no purpose in pain, and all of life is meaningless.

This is a very difficult topic because the simple, pat answer is to say that we should just buck up and smile at the trials that come our way. But, for those who experience the real pain of mental illness it's not that simple. There are those who, because of a mental illness struggle with depression, and they can't simply turn a switch and smile. And so I want to be very careful as we talk about this topic.

And actually, it is far too simplistic, and frankly, demented to think that we should somehow enjoy the pain, or look forward to it. What James is saying though, is we have a choice in the attitude we have towards pain and suffering and difficulty in our lives. The choice is not whether or not we will have pain. We will have pain, suffering, and trials in our lives. That much we can count on.

Let me ask you a question. How many of you have experienced some kind of what you would call a trial or tribulation in your lifetime? How about in the last year? Or the last week? Or, in the last twenty-four hours?

Tough times are a part of life aren't they? We cannot escape them. We can't buy our way out of most of them. There is no easy street in real life, only in our dreams. In my dreams, when I am sailing, the seas are calm and the sky is blue. It is peaceful and I don't have a care in the world. But, that is only fantasy. Trials are inescapable.

[10]

And the first step in maturity is realizing that **trials are a normal part of life.**

I have to tell you about my week. It was, by any measure, not a good week for me. God has a way of helping me to live out my sermons the week before I preach them. Sometimes I wish he wouldn't do that.

Most of you have likely heard that we have rented out our building for an "All Candidates Meeting" for the upcoming federal election. I gave the go ahead in the summer to book the rental assuming, wrongly, that it was an Elections Canada event and it would be a great way for us to open up our building to the community. Last week, it came out in the news that the local Conservative candidate would not be attending the meeting.

It also became clear through the local paper that the group renting the building was not, in fact, Elections Canada, but a very left leaning organization. I took a look at their website and found that their main values and issues they are concerned about are things God has called us to be concerned about as well, such as "clean water, fair trade, green energy, public health care and a vibrant economy." These are all good things. God has called us to be stewards of his creation. We are to redeem what has been broken since the fall.

But, after digging further into the agenda of this group we found that, it seems, because of the issues they feel are important, they have one goal and that is to oust the Conservative Party. This creates a huge problem for us, not because we are supporters of the Conservative Party. We are actually not permitted by law, as a not-for-profit society, to align ourselves with any one political party. And the fact of the matter is that God is not necessarily Conservative any more than he is Republican. There are God loving, Jesus following, Bible believing people all along the political spectrum.

So, last week we were faced with this dilemma because of an unwise decision that I made to allow the facility to be rented to a group without asking the right questions to find out who they were. I agonized over it and spent countless hours praying and asking God if now would be a good time to rapture us to heaven so I wouldn't have to deal with the aftermath of this mess.

I spent hours on the phone with various people trying to come up with some kind of way out of the mess that I put us in. I talked with the Conservative candidate, Laura Smith, and her campaign

manager several times to see if she would like to be our “sacrificial lamb” and change her mind about participating in the event. They said they felt our pain, but had to decline.

I talked with the president of the local chapter of the group in question to see if there was anyway they could rent another facility, but they had already spent considerable dollars in publicity and there was no way that they could get the word out in time to change venues. I spent considerable time talking with Dale Stevens, our board chair and some of the other board members. We had a conference call with a retired Christian lawyer, who has significant experience dealing with these kinds of issues. He gave us some unofficial advice suggesting that we go ahead with the meeting since we had given our word, and to pull out, at this point, would compromise the name of Jesus. “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ ‘no,’” he said.

Next Wednesday, I will be at the “All Candidates Meeting”. I am going to open it with a disclaimer that **“Campbell River Baptist Church is in no way affiliated with The CoC, and any literature, opinions, statements or discourse expressed are solely those of The CoC and the participating parties or individuals.”** And Dale will be there to close the meeting with the same disclaimer so there is no misunderstanding.

I can honestly say that last week was one of the hardest of my career as a pastor. I felt like a complete failure. And I was tempted to feel so much shame and dive into a pit of despair. I had to continually **consider** how I was going to respond to the trial I had put myself in. Nobody likes trials or suffering, but there is another dimension of pain added to a trial when it is inadvertently self-inflicted and the eyes of the world are on you.

[11]

All week long I was able to practice considering it pure joy. **Consider** how I am going to respond to this trial. **Consider** how I am going to treat others in the middle of the trial. **Consider it joy.** I have to tell you, it has been great practice, and I believe that God, in his omnipotent sovereignty can make something good from this. Just think about it. I get a couple minutes at the beginning of this meeting filled with people who may or may not know Jesus. And Dale gets a couple minutes at the end to close it off. That is pretty amazing!

We need to remember that trials are normal. We cannot escape them. Sometimes the trials are inflicted on us and sometimes they come because of decisions we make, but come they will.

[12]

1 Peter 4:12 (ESV)

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

There is a book written by Mike Mason called *Champagne for the Soul* about his pursuit of becoming a joyful person. He decided to try a ninety-day experiment and see if he could be joyful each and every day. And just to be clear, Mike Mason admitted that he is someone who has always struggled with depression, so this was not an easy exercise for him.

Here’s a quote from the book.

[13]

But you object: I can't be happy, because I'm sick, or, I can't be happy, because my husband has left me, or, I can't be happy, because I'm sad. Don't you understand? Happiness is the

very weapon you need to surmount all these conditions. Happiness doesn't come to those who sit around waiting until life gets better. Happiness comes to those who grab hold of its proffered hand in order to rise up and conquer their struggles.

[14]

The one prerequisite for happiness is the acceptance of whatever is. Am I over tired? Fine. Sick? Very well, then. Unemployed? Okay, I'll work with that. To accept what is doesn't mean I do not try to change it. All change, however, begins with acceptance. I cannot change or heal what I do not acknowledge.

[15]

We're so sure we'd be happy if only we could get free of our troubles, but going through life without troubles is not an option. While trouble-free times may come, at best they endure briefly, and they may even create a false sense of security. As it turns out, being happy has nothing to do with having trouble or not having it. Rather it's one's attitude toward trouble that makes all the difference.

[16]

Life is full of problems. Learn to be happy in spite of the problems, because they aren't going away. Yes, many will go away, but only to be replaced by other problems. Be happy with the problems you have, because the ones that are coming may be worse. Meanwhile the feast of life has been prepared just for you. Sit down and enjoy.

“Cheer up things could be worse. So, I cheered up, and sure enough things got worse.”

[17]

So, that's the first point. **Prepare for trials**, and **consider** how to grab on to joy. I know I make it sound overly simple, but I'm under no illusion that it is. Sometimes we have to fight for joy with every ounce of our being. Consider how to think about your response to the trial you are experiencing. Don't just put on a happy face and pretend everything is okay. Consider, with God's help how to face your trial so that when you come out the other end you are more mature.

[18]

The next step in the maturity process is to persevere through the trials.

[19]

James 1:2-4 (ESV)

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 [mature] and complete, lacking in nothing.

If you give up you lose. You don't gain maturity. Maturity is the goal. **Maturity comes from hanging on and allowing God to shape you through whatever difficult thing you are going to through.** Don't lose what I just said. Maturity comes from hanging on and allowing God to shape you through whatever difficult thing you are going to through.

[20]

The main reason God allows bad stuff to happen is to shape us into something beautiful, to make us more like Jesus, which is why James says we can face the trials with joy. We look forward to the final product. God never wastes our pain. I wish there was some other way of gaining maturity, but the fact is that these things are not learned from a textbook. The Bible says that even Jesus **"learned obedience through what he suffered"** (Hebrews 5:8).

Do you know what a crucible is? A crucible is a container that can withstand intense heat so metals or other substances can be melted, or shaped in them. Life is that crucible. Pain, suffering, obstacles, confusion and difficulties are the heat. When the heat gets turned up, we have an opportunity to grow.

[21]

The only way we gain maturity is to cooperate with God's Spirit in the crucible of life.

Malcolm Muggeridge, in his earlier life was an atheist, but came to a saving faith in Christ. He became a war correspondent during the second world war and then authored several books. He penned these words about twelve years before his death in 1990:

[22]

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at that time seemed especially desolating and painful. I now look back upon them with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness whether pursued or attained.

There is no quick fix, instant recipe, or pill for maturity. It only comes as we respond well and persevere through the trials in our lives. There is no other way.

[23]

The next step in the process of maturity James says is that we need to **Procure God's Wisdom in** our trials.

[24]

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Like I said earlier, many commentators try to take verses 5-8 by themselves as if it is simply saying that God has lots of wisdom and we should ask without doubting. And, although that's true, I think it makes more sense to tie all these verses back into the previous verses. They relate to the process of maturity. Where do we go for wisdom when we are experiencing difficulties? What's our first response? Do we try to plan and scheme our way out of it? Do we search for the easy way – the path of least resistance so as to avoid the pain?

Let me ask those of you who are married a question.

[25]

When you are driving and trying to get to a place you have never been before, and you don't have a GPS device to tell you how to get there, and you are having trouble finding your destination, what kind of conversation takes place in the car?

Now, I don't know this from experience, but from what I've read, it probably goes something like this.

The wife says: "Honey, why don't you stop and ask someone for directions?" And the husband replies, "I know where I'm going. We're almost there. It's just around the corner." To which the wife raises her eyebrows in disbelief because she has seen this before many times.

They go around the next corner – still lost, and the wife says, “We’re late. Why don’t we just stop and look at a map at the 7-Eleven? You don’t even have to ask for help.” Husband: “Just be patient. Don’t you trust me?”

Anyway, I’ve never done that, but I have read about the strange phenomenon called **masculine map avoidance**. Men are particularly famous for it, but I think it’s a disease that infects us all. We don’t like to ask for help. James, says, “When you are experiencing some sort of trial, or affliction, ask **God** for help.” Sometimes that’s the most spiritual prayer you can pray. One word, “Help.” God loves it when we go to him in prayer. James says when we are in the middle of the storm, go to God, and he will help. What I like to do in situations like that is head to the Psalms.

[26]

For example, **Psalm 40:1-2 (ESV)**

¹I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

God is a great listener. He inclines his ear to me like he actually cares about what I’m saying. Don’t you love it when someone does that to you? They listen like you are the only one that matters at the moment and they actually care. That’s what God does. He so enjoys being with us.

²He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet on a rock, making my steps secure.”

He doesn’t just hear. He takes action. That’s the kind of God we have. He is above all a God who delivers. Sometimes, though, we are looking for the wrong outcome. The real outcome God wants is that we would be changed through the pain. So, instead of asking God to take the pain away, try asking God to open your eyes to how he wants to shape you **through** the pain. That is the only way the pain will make sense.

[27]

Well, James says once you have gone to God and asked for wisdom, the next step in growing in maturity is to **trust him**. He will show you the way out. **Trust God and do the next right thing.**

[28]

⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

None of the messes we find ourselves in, or get ourselves into down here throw God for a loop. He can handle all of our problems.

[29]

Let’s go back to **Psalm 40 (ESV)**

³He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. ⁴Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!

That says it pretty clearly doesn’t it?

“Blessed [or happy] is the man [or woman, or boy or girl] who puts their trust in God...”

This happy person puts his or her trust in the wisdom of God, not in the so-called “wisdom” of the proud person, who is seeking after lies – those things that seem like a good idea at the time. Friends, God wants to make something beautiful out of us. With God’s help we can become ourselves – the persons that God intended us to be. He doesn’t want to take away your personhood. He actually wants to help you to peel away the extraneous baggage you carry that covers up the real you.

[30]

And the only way that is going to happen is if we prepare ourselves for the trials, realizing that they are a part of life, and we can’t wait to be joyful until we are problem free. And then persevere through the trial. Hang on. Don’t give up. If you give up you lose. Go to God for His kind of wisdom. Seek hard after it. Find it in his Word. And find it from other mature believers who have an intimate relationship with Jesus.

And once you have done those things, trust Him and do the next right thing. He is big enough to handle it. That is why we can face our trials with joy. We look forward with eyes to faith to the final product of maturity.

[31]

The writer of Hebrews wrote:

Hebrews 4:15-16

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

And then in chapter 12:1-2 he wrote:

[32]

Hebrews 12:1-2

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,...

[33]

The only way we can truly make it through a trial and consider it pure joy is to look forward with eyes of faith, knowing that God is able to make something good out of it. God never wastes our pain. Even when it is inadvertently self-inflicted, God is big enough to make something good of it. That makes life exciting doesn’t it!

Hebrews 12:11-14

¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.



Making Sense of Pain
James 1:2-8
Week of September 20th, 2015

Objective of this study: To consider how to experience joy in the middle of our trials.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 40 [in a contemporary translation] meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

What is your typical, or natural response to trials or pain?

Word/Work (60-90 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read James 1:2-8; Hebrews 12:1-3, 11-13.

Sermon Quote: "The only way we gain maturity is to cooperate with God's Spirit in the crucible of life."

3. What do you think the above quote means?
4. There is a process to maturity James describes in this section. Flesh it out. What does it look like? What are the stages in the maturity process?
5. What, in this passage, speaks to our minds, or mental activities? Look at various versions and find words that apply.
6. What is the mind - emotion connection? In what direction does it go? That is, which affects what?
7. What do you see here that has to do with our relationship, our communication with God?
8. How will this affect our actions, behaviour, and choices?
9. What do trials teach or show us about a) ourselves? and b) God? That is, what have YOU learned about yourself or God through trials?
10. How have you benefitted from perseverance? Think of specific times you have persevered, and specific ways you have benefitted.

Sermon Quote: “Instead of asking God to take the pain away try asking God to open your eyes to how he wants to shape you through the pain.”

11. Apply this study specifically to a situation you are going through right now. What can you learn about facing your trial purposefully so the outcome is more maturity and more of the fruits of the Spirit produced in you?