

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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**COUNT IT ALL JOY?
ARE YOU SERIOUS?**

James 1:2-12

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first book in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, there is a moment when Frodo, the most famous of all the Hobbits who inhabited the Shire, laments that a great evil has erupted in his generation. He says: "I wish it need not have happened in my time."

Gandalf, the wizard, responds to Frodo with both compassion and wisdom. "So do I," he says, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

As we deal with the impact of a global pandemic that has taken nearly a quarter of a million lives worldwide (probably more), infected more than 1.1 million Americans, and cost the lives of more than 66,000 Americans; an economic shutdown with devastating consequences for individuals, families, businesses, and governments; disruptions in daily life with schools, churches, businesses, and recreational facilities closed; and a rapid rise in loneliness, anxiety and fear due to the invisible enemy that has so radically upended "normal life" for so many of us; there is no question that we are living in such a time as Frodo lamented. We all wish it were not happening now, and that it would not ever come to pass. But, as Gandalf said, it is not for us to decide. All we can do is choose how to face it.

James, of course, knew nothing of the coronavirus. The author of this New Testament book was not the apostle James, the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee. *That James* was one of the first Christian martyrs, put to death by Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great). You can read about it in Acts 12:1-2. *This James* was the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. At first, like his brothers, he did not believe that his brother could actually be the Son of God. But after Jesus' resurrection, God opened the eyes of James' heart. He became a follower of Christ and the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Though he didn't know anything about the coronavirus, James did know something about the reality of suffering in the life of a Christian. He knew about the inevitability of encountering trials, tests, difficulties, stresses, and pressures of various kinds from all sides in the midst of this often-troubled life. He knew that the believers to whom he wrote this letter – mainly Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution or the threat of it – needed wisdom and encouragement to persevere in their faith, to "keep on keeping on," in the face of challenges that, like Frodo, they likely wished they didn't have to face.

What James says to them (and to us) in verse 2 has got to be one of the hardest, one of the most difficult and most challenging statements anywhere in the Bible. It is right up there with:

- Love your enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27).
- Do good to those who hate you (Luke 6:27, 35).
- Bless those who curse you (Luke 6:28).
- Pray for those who mistreat [or persecute] you (Luke 6:28; Matthew 5:44).

These are things that are exact opposites of our natural instincts. When James says we should “count it all joy” or “consider it a sheer gift” (*MSG*) when tests and trials and troubles come at us from all sides, our natural inclination is to say: “What are you talking about? Are you serious? You can’t be serious!” I have this picture in my mind of tennis great John McEnroe – remember him? – who was famous for his meltdown at Wimbledon one year (1981), when he lost his cool and shouted at the umpire after what he thought was a bad call: “You can’t be serious. You *cannot* be serious!”

James *was* serious. He really meant it when he said: “Count it all joy” (ESV) or “pure joy,” as it says in the NIV. One translation says: “Count yourselves supremely happy” (NEB). When you read or hear these words, you may wonder if James has lost his mind. Doesn’t it seem irrational at best to “consider it pure joy” when you face trials or tests you never asked for, when life is hard, when you’re dealing with an awful pandemic with all its ripple effects, or some other crisis in your life? “You cannot be serious!”

But James *is* serious. And he is not alone. In Romans 5, Paul says: “We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (5:2). Amen to that! But then he continues: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings ...” (5:3). *In our sufferings*.

Elsewhere, in Philippians 4, Paul gives this instruction: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (4:4). When? Not sometimes. Not just when you feel like rejoicing. Not just when your life is going great. *Always*. Which includes the hard times as well as the good.

In the last of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, Jesus says: “Blessed are you” – when? – “when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad” – why? – “because great is your reward in heaven ...” (5:11-12). In *The Message* it says: “Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me.... You can be glad when that happens.”

All of this is counterintuitive to the point of seeming like foolishness, isn’t it? But it is not foolishness. It is the wisdom of God, which so often seems like foolishness to the watching world.

It is important to understand what James does not mean when he says we should “count it all joy when (we) face trials” of all kinds and shapes and sizes. Here is what he does not mean:

- He does not mean you should feel light-hearted and gleeful when you get bad news or go through painful experiences or severe trials.
- He does not mean that your sufferings or hardships or trials are themselves reasons for joy. To “rejoice in suffering” does not mean to “enjoy suffering” (Ron Lee Davis, *Gold in the Making*, 35-36).

- He does not mean that you should celebrate when bad things happen to you, to those you love, or to people around the world who suffer.
- He does not mean that you should thank God for the coronavirus, for cancer or other illness, for unemployment or poverty or hunger, for divorce or infidelity, for pornography or drug or alcohol addiction, for tornadoes or hurricanes or other natural disasters, for abuse of any kind, for persecution or any other kind of evil under the sun.

It is a distortion, a perversion of the Bible's teaching to suggest that any of these things is good and is itself a reason to rejoice. This is not what the Bible says. It is not what James says.

What James means, and what the Bible teaches, is that in the midst of the troubles and trials and disruptions and difficulties that inevitably intrude on our lives, we are to make the conscious and deliberate decision to see them as occasions for joy – not because they are good in themselves, but because of the good that God can produce through them. The reason that trials (like the one in which we find ourselves today, or any trial you may ever go through) are “grounds for joy” (Donald Burdick, *James: Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, 168) is that they are capable of producing perseverance in our lives, which in turn is used by God to forge the character of Christ in us.

Do you see that? God uses the hardships that come uninvited into our lives to shape us into the people He has designed us to be. They put our faith to the test. They are used by God to strengthen our faith. Listen to what Peter says about this in 1 Peter 1: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this” – in this living hope, in this promise, in this truth, in this certainty – “you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor (to God) when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1:3-7).

Pandemics like the one we are dealing with are not inevitable, although it is not unique in the history of the world. What *is* inevitable is that we will and do “suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6). James does not say: “Consider it pure joy *if* you face trials.” He says: “... *when* you face trials” (James 1:2). It is not an *if* but a *when*. Only a few things are certain in life. Among them are *death* and *taxes*, to which we may add *change*, *uncertainty*, and *trials*.

Pain, suffering, trouble, and trials are an inescapable part of life. You can't avoid them. Trouble happens to everyone. As John Piper says: “Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road” (Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 101-102). If you think otherwise, you will be sorely disappointed.

When they come into your life, troubles can make you bitter. Or they can make you better. It is true of the coronavirus. It is true of the pandemic and all its effects. It is true of the effect it has had on jobs and businesses and the economy in general. It is true of the enforcement of social distancing guidelines. It is true of all the disruptions the coronavirus has caused. We didn't ask for it. We didn't – and don't – want it. But it is with us. It can make us bitter – angry, distressed, depressed, impatient, annoyed, or resentful. Or, by God's grace, it can make us better. God can use the troubles and trials brought on by the coronavirus to make us better.

You and I have a choice to make in the midst of what we're going through right now. There is a choice to make whenever trials and tests come. We can choose to become bitter. Or we can choose to become better. We can choose to allow trials and hardships to defeat us. Or, by looking to God and trusting in Him, we can have victory in the midst of whatever trial we are going through.

I sometimes say that the key to happiness is low expectations. It is not the only key to happiness, I know. It doesn't apply to every situation in life. It can be really helpful, though, if you're a fan of the Washington Redskins or, like me, the Pittsburgh Pirates!

James is not focused on the key to happiness. He has a higher purpose in mind. He is thinking in terms of spiritual maturity. He is thinking about the process of spiritual growth by which we are made complete in Christ and lack nothing of all that God desires to give us (1:4). What James is saying is that the key to spiritual maturity is your trials and what you do with them – or, what you allow God to do in you through them.

This is why Paul writes in Romans 5 that “we rejoice in our sufferings” (5:3). Why? “Because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance (produces) character; and character (produces) hope” – a hope that “does not disappoint us ...” (5:3-4).

The Message says: “We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next.”

Troubles are the crucible in which this “passionate patience” – perseverance, steadfastness, tenacious resilience, staying power – is developed. And perseverance, when it has done its work, produces a tried and tested faith, and a life that reflects the character of Jesus our Lord.

This is what James is talking about. You can't develop Christian character in a cocoon. It is warm and safe and comfortable there, but you don't become like Jesus in a cocoon. (Davis, *Gold in the Making*, 18). God uses suffering to teach us perseverance in our faith. He uses tests and trials to cultivate the quality of endurance in us. He uses storms of adversity to make us spiritually strong. He then uses this quality of endurance or perseverance, what Peterson calls “passionate patience,” to make us more and more spiritually mature – more and more complete in Christ, more and more like Jesus.

It is because of the goal – it is because of the destination in view – that James can tell us to “count it pure joy whenever (we) face trials of many kinds.” Not because there is something innately good in the trials, but because of what God can do in and through us in the midst of them. If we will let Him. *If we will let Him.*

This is a biblical principle that applies to every life, and not just now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. It applies to your life in every season, in every circumstance, in every test or trial or hardship or disruption you will ever face. I know it applies to my life.

I have gone through seasons of suffering in my life, as some of you know. I have had chronic daily headaches for more than 20 years that are like a thorn in my flesh. I had an acoustic neuroma (a brain tumor) that cost me my hearing in my left ear, and a traumatic brain injury that severely disrupted my life. I went through a lengthy period of grieving over my relationship with my Dad, who died more than 25 years ago. This Tuesday, May 5, would be my Dad’s 100th birthday.

I have not enjoyed any of these experiences of pain or suffering or disruption. But I can say I am thankful for what God has taught me and how He has changed me. I really believe God has made me a better man and a better Christian as a result of these trials in my life. I hope He has made me a better husband and father. And a better pastor. I have come to a deeper understanding of God and His grace than I would ever have had apart from these experiences.

What about you? Have you allowed God to use the tests and trials in your life to strengthen and deepen your faith? To cultivate a Christ-like character that exhibits the fruit of the Spirit?

And what about now? What about this “trial” in which we find ourselves? Though, like Frodo, we wish it had not happened in our time – or ever, we cannot wish it away. We can only choose what we will do with the time that is given us.

Will you let God use it for His good purpose in your life? To refine your faith? To strengthen your discipleship? To deepen your love for Him? To grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (2 Peter 3:18)?

Will you use this time – are you using it – to reestablish or renew or forge new, healthy relationships with the people God has given you to love ... your spouse, your children, your parents, other family members? Will you use this time – are you using it – to find creative ways to show your love (and God’s) to your neighbors or others in need? Will you use this time, as God gives you the ability, to be generous with your time and money to help others?

If you’re in need in this season, please reach out to me or to one of the elders or deacons of the church. We want to provide help for every member of our church family who needs it. Not just now, but always, we want to live out the spirit of Galatians 6:10, which says: “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

For all of us, this is a season that calls for perseverance in faith, in hope, in love, and in good works to benefit others. Listen to what James says in verse 12: “Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when you have stood the test, you will receive the crown of life God has promised to those who love Him.”

“Blessed.” It is the Greek word *makarios*, the same word Jesus uses nine times in the Beatitudes. Jesus also uses it in John 13:17, where, after washing the feet of His disciples and explaining its significance to them, He says: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed (*makarioi*) if you do them.” It is used again in Acts 20:35, where Paul quotes the Lord Jesus as saying: “It is more blessed (*makarios*) to give than to receive.”

The time will come – soon, God willing – when we look back on the trial we are all going through, and we will see – I pray – the hand of God and the grace of God in all His dealings with us. While we are in the midst of it, let’s make every effort to choose joy in the midst of every challenge, every disruption and inconvenience. Let’s make every effort to make the best use of the time and circumstances that have been thrust upon us. Let’s make every effort, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen our spiritual muscles of faith and perseverance, so that we may become more and more mature in Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.