**The blessing of trials** 26/6/22 dkm

Read: Hebrews 10:19-39, James 1

Text: James 1: 1-4

Psalms: 8, 1, 84:5-12, 57:9-11

Shortly after I was married we started attending an Anglican church in the city. The minister, Allan Blanch, led a Bible study in the manse opposite Sydney University in Glebe. I recall one of those studies being on James chapter 4. I recall it because the teaching was clear, brief, and succinct, and also practical. Someone has called James a ‘How to’ manual; ‘How to face trials’ is the first lesson. His analysis of this book includes five ‘How to…’ headings and twenty four ‘How to…’ subheadings! ‘James is a practical manual for vital Christians’. It could also be called a book on the works of faith- ‘Faith endures trials’, ‘Faith shows no partiality’, ‘Faith controls the tongue’, and so on. Where the apostle Paul in his letters begins with doctrine and ends with practical application, James jumps right into application, but we will find doctrine woven into the practical teaching of this little book of the NT.

This book of just five chapters is a letter, as indicated by the opening verse. As in Paul’s letters, we find the writer’s name and title, along with reference to the recipients. The greetings of this letter are limited to just one, ‘Greetings’. The writer identifies himself as ‘James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). There are five men in the Bible called ‘James’, so who is this ‘James’? Two of Jesus’ disciples were called James; one was the brother of John and son of Zebedee, and the other the son of Alphaeus. John’s brother James died in AD44, the first apostle to be martyred, while little is known of the other disciple called James. Another James is the father of Judas, not Iscariot, and the fourth is James the Less, son of Mary who watched Jesus being crucified (Mark 15:40). The fifth James is the half-brother of Jesus who became a believer and leader of the Jerusalem church. He presided over the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and welcomed Paul when he brought the collection to the Jerusalem church (Acts 21:18).

James refers to himself as, ‘a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). As a servant ‘of God and of Jesus Christ’, James implies equality in the Godhead; he mentions the Spirit later in his letter (4:5). James claimed no more status for himself as the half-brother of Jesus than did Mary as the mother of Jesus. Both saw Jesus as their Lord and Messiah, meaning they were servants of Jesus Christ. Leaders or office-bearers in the church are also bondservants of Jesus Christ. It is an honour to be called to leadership in the house of God but also a great responsibility. James writes, ‘Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment’ (3:1).

James writes to, ‘The twelve tribes which are scattered abroad’ (1:1). The nation of Israel consisted of twelve tribes, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. But James was not writing to the Jews; he was writing to Christians, particularly Christians of Jewish background- as most in the Jerusalem church were. He was writing to the church as the new Israel of God (Gal 6:16). These predominantly Jewish Christians were scattered out of this city- the Greek word is ‘*diaspora*’. After the Jews stoned Stephen, ‘a great persecution arose against the church’, so the Christians fled to the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1)

As refugees, these Christians lived in poverty. They were both persecuted and poor, as is usually the case. Moreover, the initial sharing of all things within the church seems to have given way to a rich-poor division in the church (2:2). The world with all its pleasures and desirable things, often seeps into the thinking and conduct of Christians, and hence into the church. James has a strong word for such backsliding - he calls it adultery, spiritual adultery (4:4). He says such conduct is a sign of submission to Satan rather than to God. ‘Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up’ is one of the key lessons of this letter (4:10). If you will not humble yourself, then the Lord may well humble you. Not all trials are for our correction, but when we face various trials we must learn from them and grow through them, to the glory of God.

So it is that James begins his letter on the subject of trials, telling us to face trials with joy, because they are a testing of our faith, having the purpose of moving us towards wholeness, completion or perfection.

**1. Trials and joy**

Our first response to trials or suffering is not usually one of joy or rejoicing. We don’t come home praising the Lord that we have just had a car accident, although we may be thankful that no one was injured- but what if they were? We don’t come home from the doctor praising God that we have just been diagnosed with cancer. Some Christians have the idea that if we praise God, and ‘in everything give thanks’ literally, that God will stop our suffering, but James does not say this- he does not teach ‘magic formulas’ or ‘fake’ praise. What he does teach is that God is in control, and that God has a purpose in allowing us to fall into various trials. ‘The suffering of believers is always under the providential control of a God who wants what is best for his people’. This is the reason James tells these Christians to ‘consider it pure joy when you fall into various trials’ (1:2). Peter also tells diaspora Jews not to be surprised when they suffer painful trials (1Peter 4:12).

James writes to ‘brethren’ or brothers and sisters in Christ who have been scattered abroad. They have been uprooted from their homes because of persecution, and are finding life difficult in a new place. They are probably longing to return to ‘normality’ and ‘security’, to being in control of their lives. James does not promise return or relief from suffering, but he does tell them they can have joy in the midst of their suffering. How can this be? Paul might have said, ‘grace and peace be with you’ but James says, ‘joy’. The word ‘joy’ naturally includes peace; it speaks of an inner peace and contentment that overflows into one’s outlook on life and one’s conduct. Paul refers to love, joy, and peace as fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

If our trials are by way of harassment, ridicule, or persecution, we may think of retaliating or taking vengeance, but if our hearts are filled with peace and joy such thoughts will not remain. We will commit ourselves in the hands of almighty God. We rightly look for justice, but know that God is judge (4:12, 5:9). For our part, we look to the Lord and listen to what he is saying to us.

Often our suffering is caused by our own foolishness, not by other people, even if we try to blame someone else. Often our suffering has no cause; we simply fall upon difficult times like Job. James casts the net wide in referring to trials of many kinds, as he focusses on our response to trials, not their source, their type, or on avoiding trials. Note that James says ‘when’ not ‘if’ you face trials. Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). James displays a thorough knowledge of the words of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 5:12).

**2. Testing of faith and perseverance**

For the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross (Heb 12:2). Jesus suffered in this world, just as we do- and he had no sin! Jesus knew that God had a purpose in his suffering, namely our redemption. Jesus suffered unto death, even death on the cross, for our salvation. In his great love for us, and knowing the purpose of his suffering, Jesus endured the cross with joy. He also knew that God would reward his obedience in raising him from the dead to return to heavenly glory. While suffering is never for the purpose of paying for our own sins, or the sins of others, it is for our sanctification, for our growth and maturing in the precious faith which the Lord has given us.

Looking back to the OT, we see how the Lord allowed his covenant people to suffer when they turned away to follow other gods. They suffered oppression at the hands of their enemies, along with drought and disease. Through this suffering, God drew his people back to himself. We hear them crying to the Lord for mercy as they endured suffering. Can you remember crying to the Lord at a time of terrible suffering?

While our suffering may not be the direct outcome of our sin, it still serves to draw us nearer to the Lord. It is easy to wander away from the Lord, to get on the wrong path as it were, or maybe just give up and sit down on the path we are on. The Christian life is a journey or pilgrimage in which we will meet many obstacles; we will be tested time and again. James says that the testing of our faith produces perseverance or endurance. Testing serves to strengthen us for the next part of the journey. Testing serves to make us more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

James loves metaphors but it is Peter who provides a metaphor about the purpose of suffering as testing our faith. In referring to momentary suffering under various trials, Peter writes, ‘That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour , and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 1:7). Testing serves to purify our faith, to get rid of any dross or impediments. Testing does not produce faith but it produces perseverance, and it purifies the faith we have been given. To purify has the sense of perfecting, which is what James teaches in the next verse.

**3. Towards perfection or completeness**

When perseverance finishes its work we reach completion or perfection (1:4). Something that is complete ‘lacks nothing’; it is whole in every way. Not only will we become whole; we will become holy, reaching to the measure of the stature and fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). Now can you see God’s purpose in allowing us to face trials and tribulations in this earthly life? They are inevitable anyway, but as believers we face trials differently to unbelievers. We face trials in the knowledge that God is in control, and that he is working all things together for our good. Trials bring us closer to God if we accept them and bear up under their weight.

Paul assures us that God will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear and will provide a way of escape (1Cor 10:13). James assures us that if we face trials with faith, our faith will be strengthened. He says that faith produces perseverance, and when perseverance has finished its work you will be perfect and complete. Paul says something similar in Romans 5:3-4 where he writes, ‘We also glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope’.

Our hope is heaven; our hope is to be found fully and finally in Christ. We will not attain perfection in this life but it is our hope, our sure and certain hope for the end of our life in this world. Jesus said, ‘You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mat 5:48). Paul did not see himself as having attained perfection but he pressed on toward the goal of perfection in Christ Jesus, and of the crown of righteousness (Phil 3:12, 14, 2Tim 4:8); James speaks of receiving the crown of life in verse 12.

Have you faced any trials of late? Are you facing a trial at the moment, maybe sickness, bereavement, disappointment, or even poverty? Has James shown you a new way of looking at this trial? There is a way to be patient and persevere in affliction and suffering. There is even a way to ‘count it all joy’ when you fall into some kind of trial. That way is found in looking to the Lord with a heart of faith. The Lord gives faith for this very purpose, that we might believe he is in control and that he will bring us through any and every trial to make us perfect and complete in the Lord Jesus Christ.