

Being Joyous

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 August 2017

Preacher: Bruce Pass

[0 : 00] Thank you. Well, let us pray that the Lord would open our hearts to what he's just spoken to us in his precious word. Loving Father, we thank you that we can hear you speak to us. We ask, Father, that you would open our hearts and we ask, Father, that your word would dwell in us and enrich us in every way this morning.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, Graham has a week up his sleeve at the end of each sermon series and I thought it might be helpful in these filler weeks if we would have a look at the letter of James because you can delve into James every now and then quite easily.

James' letter doesn't really build up an argument the way that Paul's letters often do. It's a bit more like a grab bag of reflections on the Christian life and the very first aspect of the Christian life that James wants to reflect on is actually the first point that Graham raised in his sermon last week. So thematically it connects quite nicely. Now who can remember the first point of Graham's sermon last week? Time to put somebody on the spot and see how much we listen to sermons.

Maybe I should ask one of the elders. So, anybody? What was Graham's first point from last week? No hands. The elders are starting to sweat.

[1 : 19] So, who could remember? Oh. To stand firm and cry. In order to wait. Almost. Almost. Graham's first point was to rejoice. To be joyful.

That's right. Rejoice. The Apostle Paul was indeed telling the Philippians to rejoice and stand firm in their trials and to rejoice always. He was commanding us to rejoice not just according to the circumstances that we find ourselves in but because what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus is so amazing.

But let's just think about that for a minute. If you had to write a list of your all-time moments of pure joy, what would go down on paper? Perhaps it would include Scotland's glorious defeat of Australia a few weeks ago.

Particularly sweet, given what happened in the 2015 world final, quarterfinal. I was on the other side of the globe so that wasn't quite so painful for me. Perhaps it would include signing on the dotted line of your first home or a reunion perhaps with a long-lost friend.

But what about a difficult job? What about getting cancer? What about a very strained marriage? Would any of these things make it onto your list? Of course not.

[2 : 40] These things aren't sources of joy. They're unpleasant. They're painful. But astonishingly, James begins his letter by saying that they should make it onto such a list. In verse 2, James says, consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

Now what kind of jerk writes that? It's completely insensitive. What pastor says that? Wouldn't it be a bit more pastoral to say, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry to hear that you're going through such a rough time?

Wouldn't that be the properly Christian response to a trial, a serious trial of our faith? The thing is, it's actually hard to imagine anyone better qualified to offer a more properly Christian response.

The James who wrote this letter knew Jesus better than anyone. He spent many more years alongside Jesus than any of the disciples. As far as we know, this is the James who grew up in the same home as Jesus.

More than anyone, James knew the Lord Jesus best. And perhaps that's why James actually became the most prominent leader of the early church. Well, that doesn't seem like it at first glance.

[4 : 06] What James is saying here is in fact a profoundly Christian response to the sufferings and difficulties that we face in life. And I think if we don't try to get to grips with this, if we don't try to get to grips with it, we stand to lose a lot.

But in order to do that, we've got to slow down. We've got to slow down to think very carefully about the what and the why and the how of this very short sentence to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds.

And the what, I think, is like to suggest the what is especially easy to get wrong. It's very easy to get wrong. And I think a lot of Christians actually do get it wrong. And it's very easy to misunderstand what James is saying.

It's easy to hear him getting a bit zen, as if James is telling us to convince ourselves that what is painful is actually not painful after all. That we just pretend it away, to turn pain off like a tap and pretend that trials are fun.

This reminds me of a series of children's books that I had as a child. Maybe some of you might have had them. They were written by Monroe Leaf. He's actually a British author, so maybe some of the people here have seen them.

[5 : 20] Has anyone come across them? No? The titles of these books all end in Can Be Fun. So manners can be fun. Safety can be fun. And they have this bizarre psychological agenda.

They're full of pictures like this one. It's kind of South Park meets Pilgrim's Progress. And if I show any more it'll completely distract you and you won't listen to anything more I've said in the sermon. But the point is fairly clear. I mean, how is this going to work? Trying to convince a child that something is fun when it isn't is madness. I mean, what six-year-old boy having read one of these books is going to think that manners are fun or safety for that fact?

Anyway, the problem is, of course, a lot of Christians read James' letter as if it were, in fact, written by Monroe Leaf. They hear James trying to convince them really that getting sick or going through some other kind of crisis can be fun.

That's not at all what James is saying. James is not saying that trials can be fun. More than anyone, James knew that trials are painful and unpleasant.

[6 : 31] According to tradition, James himself was martyred in Jerusalem by being thrown off the roof of the temple and then clubbed to death. I'm sure that wasn't fun. So we need to take care with what James is saying.

Trials are not fun and he's not trying to convince us that they are. He's actually saying something quite different. He's talking about what trials achieve for us.

He's telling us that as painful as they may be, they are, in fact, a means to a glorious end. We are to consider it joy when we face trials of many kinds because of what they bring about for us.

And he's calling us to a shift of mindset in that. But before we go any further, I want to suggest this is a shift of mindset that's actually not all that unfamiliar.

Perhaps you've made it yourself and if you haven't, I'm sure you've observed it in others. Take, for example, running. I honestly can't ever imagine wanting to run a marathon.

[7 : 37] I enjoy running in moderation. I usually run up and down the Union Canal on a Sunday morning, depending on how my aging knees and hamstrings are holding up. I'll happily run five miles.

I have no desire whatsoever to run 26. Although I know there are a few people here that do, so you're mad and I'm not. But in any case, the bandmaster of our children's former school back in Sydney, he really, really, really does.

In fact, he's run 50 of them. Noel even has a blog on the internet about his running and recounting a recent ultra-marathon. So ultra-marathons, that's in another level.

He writes, if I have a weakness in these kinds of events, it would have to be a cramp around the four-hour mark. Four-hour mark. In so many cases, I've suffered excruciating cramps in my upper legs.

Today would be no different. Will I do it again? Yep. Count me in. Noel simply loves it. He ran from Newcastle to Sydney, which was about from Edinburgh to London, I think.

[8 : 41] But anyway, who cares? He loves running. And does he love the pain? Of course not. He really suffers.

But he makes a mind shift about that pain, which is very similar to the one that James is talking about. Noel loves the end that the pain achieves for him.

He loves the glorious end of finishing the race. And this is the same as what James is saying.

James is saying that if we fix our eyes on the glorious end that our trials are achieving for us, it will transform our experience of pain.

And the key thing, therefore, is that we understand what this end is. And thankfully, James tells us exactly what it is. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that what? So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

[9 : 54] Mature and complete. This is the glorious end for those who entrust themselves to the Lord Jesus. More literally, James says, perfect and complete.

See, James isn't talking here about just a basic Christian maturity where you leave your gross sins behind and you learn more about Jesus. No, he has something much, much bigger in mind.

James speaks of a glorious hope, the hope of becoming a perfect and complete human being.

Right now, we're very imperfect and very incomplete human beings, aren't we?

We've been forgiven if we put our trust in Jesus, but we fail on a daily basis. We fall down and sin.

We might have changed a bit, but we still drift back into that place where we came from.

We might be growing a bit, but we barely come up to Jesus' waist. Kate bought some high-heeled boots the other day because our eldest son, Joe, who's growing so fast, Joe, is growing into his full physical stature and the Lord willing in the course of his life, he will also attain to the full stature of Christ.

[11 : 10] And that is the glorious end of the Christian life. God changes us from the inside out until we attain to the full stature of Christ. And irrespective of how much progress we actually make in this, in the course of our life, God will bring this to completion on the day that he raises us from the dead and transforms us in glory.

On that day, we won't be raised as incomplete and imperfect human beings that we are now. We will resemble the Lord Jesus in every way. This is the maturity and completeness that James is talking about.

This is the glorious end for which trials are the means. And James resumes his train of thought in verse 12 to flesh this out where he writes again, blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

The crown of life is the glorious perfection and completeness that God will bestow on those who love him, on those who have entrusted themselves to Jesus who will raise him from the dead.

On that day they will resemble Jesus in all his magnificent beauty. We will be raised as Jesus is raised. And I think James actually had someone very much like Noel in mind when he chose the metaphor of a crown because it's running imagery.

[12 : 48] When James uses the word crown it refers to the laurel wreath presented to the winning athlete in the ancient games. Standing firm through trials James says is just like that.

It's like a race with lots of pain but at the end you are crowned with eternal life. There's a bit of difference between the Olympic games and the Christian life.

The metaphor kind of falls down a bit as all preaching metaphors do because we're not exactly competing against each other for this crown. There's more than one of them. In the Christian life you just need to finish to get the crown.

You don't need to come first. So I guess James' crown is more like the t-shirt that you get at the end of finishing a modern marathon. In any case James' point is pretty clear. There is a glorious end for us if we stand firm through the trials of our faith.

That glorious end is the perfection and completion that we await at the resurrection. And when you get this what James is saying about joy starts to become a little bit more clear.

[13 : 59] It starts to make more sense. We are to consider trials as pure joy not because they're fun but because they are a means to a glorious end.

And if you see that the what makes more sense but if you're really honest you'll admit that a new problem actually starts to arise.

And that's the problem of the why. why would trials be God's means for our perfection and completion?

Why would he do that? Why would God choose terrible experiences as the means of our transformation? Who here hasn't asked that question?

Perhaps only the people who have never experienced what James is talking about. James is not silly. He knows that this is a very serious question and so he wants to offer an answer to it. We can

be tempted to blame God or even wonder whether God somehow enjoys our suffering.

[15:04] These are dark thoughts and James wants to protect us from them. But to understand his answer a very brief Greek lesson is necessary. There's a connection between verse 13 and verse 2 which is invisible in our English Bibles.

unless that is you're following on with one of the very few translations that preserves this connection. Has anybody here grown up with the King James version?

No? I know that this fellow was reading it until a little while ago. The King James actually preserves this connection between verse 13 and verse 2 and this connection holds the key to warding off the feeling that creeps up on us the feeling of blaming God for the trials we face.

and the key is seeing how there is an element of temptation in every trial. Think about it. Every difficulty challenge and instance of suffering presents a powerful temptation to give up on God. Many of us will be able to think of a difficult time in our life which nearly brought us to give up on God and that temptation was every bit as real as being tempted to sin in some other way.

[16:16] Every trial is a temptation to give up on God and if you're being persecuted for your faith you can be tempted to stop trusting God especially in that situation.

If you're suffering a terrible physical or mental illness you can be tempted to stop trusting God in that situation. Whatever the trial might be it tempts us to give up on God and it's exactly the same as being tempted to sin in lust or anger or envy.

we are tempted to put faith to one side just in a different way. As Paul says in Romans 14 verse 23 whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

So when trials do bring us to want to give up on God it's very easy to blame him for that and that's why James reminds us in verse 13 when tempted no one should say God is tempting me for God cannot be tempted by evil nor does he tempt anyone.

Difficulties challenges sufferings might bring us to resent him for bringing these things into our lives but we must never blame God for that. He isn't trying to deliberately undermine our faith.

[17:33] Pain and suffering come as part of the consequences of humanity's disobedience and rejection of God wholesale. We're the ones who opened Pandora's box.

We're the ones who brought pain and suffering into the world and this is James' answer to the why. But James also knows that this is fairly cold comfort.

James knows that by itself this why actually isn't really going to bring us any closer to considering trials as joy and that is why he's careful also to say something about the how.

Coming to grips with what holds the key to this mind shift is what James is talking about when he goes on in verses 16 and 17 to say don't be deceived my dear brothers.

Every good and perfect gift comes from above coming down from the father. Don't be deceived James says. Adam and Eve brought the paper but God is using it to wrap a glorious gift.

[18:45] By themselves trials are bad news but God takes them and he uses them as a means of bestowing on us a good and perfect gift. The crown of life that he was just speaking about in verse 12 and the how simply consists in focusing on the gift and not the paper in not allowing the challenges these trials pose to our faith to deceive us into thinking that the crown of life is actually a fairly average gift.

The how simply consists in seeing really seeing the glory of the end to which God calls us in his gospel. If we really see what we will be it will kindle a joy that cannot be quenched by any pain or difficulty.

The transformation that God holds out for us in his gospel is so immeasurably great it defies all description. No eye has seen no ear has heard no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

But God has revealed it to us by his spirit. So says Paul God has revealed it to us what we shall be. In the scriptures God has revealed to us that the Lord of glory the crucified one now risen from the dead and seated in glory. God has revealed Jesus Christ and the promise of the gospel is that we shall be like him and that we shall share with him in his glory.

[20:21] 2 Thessalonians 2.14 God called you to be saved through the gospel that you might share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. God has revealed what God has prepared for those who love him.

He has shown us his good and perfect gift which awaits us at Christ's return. All we need to do is fix our eyes on the horizon of our faith. The problem is though that in times of trials our horizon

becomes so foreshortened that we can barely see two feet in front of us.

It's like when the horror comes in. I was quite surprised in St Andrews recently at a conference someone turned a smoke machine on outside St Mary's College and then I had to remind myself that I was in Scotland.

But this is exactly what happens in our trials. We can see nothing of what lies beyond our trials when we're in the midst of them, let alone the eternity that stretches out for us in the resurrection. The trials block everything out. The pain and the difficulty of what we're experiencing simply clouds our vision. But we can rejoice in trials if only we gain a fresh glimpse of what lies ahead.

[21 : 37] In this respect it's a bit like driving on the autobahn. There's no speed limit on those things which means you have to look a very long way forwards and back because the cars are travelling so fast.

And it's exactly the same when we go through trials we need to be looking a long way back. And a long way forward we need to be looking back to the resurrection and forwards to Christ's return if we are to rejoice in our trials.

If we can lift our eyes from our trials to see what lies ahead, even for a moment we will see things that can move us in a very different way. If we can gain a glimpse of the risen Christ reigning at the right hand of the Father in glory, it will stir something.

joy. If we look long enough and see in him the promise of what we shall be, it might even become joy. Seeing in Christ a reflection of our future selves is what holds the key to making the mind shift James is speaking about.

unless we see Christ in his glory, we will not be moved to joy by the prospect of being like him.

Unless we are transfixed by his beauty, we will not be moved to joy at the thought of attaining to his full stature.

[23 : 00] The key to considering trials as joy consists in this one thing, constantly, regularly, repeatedly, regaining a glimpse of who we shall be.

And this is why we need to be soaking ourselves in all that the scriptures tell us of this. This is why we need to be scouring the word of God to fill out an identikit of our future selves in the face of Christ so that we can recall this in the midst of our trials.

When we're feeling weakened in our faith and vulnerable to sin, who Christ is must be at the very front of our minds so that we can cast our eyes on his features, on his majesty, on his mercy, and allow something of his glory to displace the anger or the despair or whatever it is that may have robbed us of that joy.

In our congregation back in Sydney, there was a retired minister who once told me how when he was feeling overwhelmed by the difficulties of his ministry, and there were many, things like he might be driving in his car to some meeting, which would really put him to the test.

He would recall the vision of Christ in Revelation chapter 1, and fill his mind with John's astonishing description of the Lord Jesus. What's spiritual wisdom?

[24 : 27] Don knew in a very deeply practical way the how of this mind shift James is speaking of. But he could make this mind shift only because he had etched the detail of what God has revealed in his word onto his mind.

He could recall this because he had looked so long at Christ's features so many times. You cannot recall what you have not seen, and you can recall only in very poor detail what you've seen in the distant past.

To see the reflection of our future selves in Christ, we must study him like the artist studies their subject. We must study Christ if we are to allow his glorious features to move us to joy in the midst of trials and make this mind shift that James is speaking of.

It's at this point though that we may need to pause for a moment and consider briefly whether God is not actually calling you to a more fundamental mind shift. It's possible that you attend church and even identify as a Christian but may have never seen Christ's glory.

It's possible that you have heard that Jesus died and rose again but have never internalized the fact that he died and rose for you. It's possible that you have heard Jesus' words but have never really taken him at his word.

[25 : 53] If that's you this morning, God is calling you to a more fundamental mind shift. God is calling you to turn to him in repentance and faith. For without this mind shift there is no crown of life.

You are running a race where there is no finish line and you remain in your sins. If that's you this morning, God is calling you to entrust yourself to Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. God is calling you to receive the promise of life, the crown of life that he holds out in his gospel. But to those of us who have made this more fundamental mind shift and received what Christ promises, God is calling us again once more to see the beauty and glory of this promise. He's calling us to see the goodness and the perfection of his gift once more so that it might begin us a movement that will bring us to regard trials with joy. So in closing I invite you to meditate now quietly on where you may need to make this mind shift in your life. There will be a tremendous range of experiences in a group of people this large. [27 : 11] There will be people who feel like it's an impossibility, that joy is an impossibility, that they're being stretched so far beyond their capacity to rejoice in their salvation. others will have perhaps gone through trials in their past and remember this difficulty well, and there will be yet others for whom these difficulties lie in the future. Wherever God's word meets us this morning, let us allow to bring our eyes to us once more on the perfection and completion of the crown of life. Let us gain a fresh glimpse of Christ in his glory so that we will be moved to the prospect of being like him. Let us allow ourselves once more to be transfixed by his beauty so that we will be moved at the joy of attaining to his full stature. Let us pray. Loving Father, we thank you that you have revealed your Son. We thank you that we see him in the precious words of his gospel. Lord, we ask that you would bring us to see once again a reflection of our future selves in his face and sustain us, Lord, and bring us to the joy of our salvation, which as Nehemiah reminds us, is our strength. [28 : 40] And we ask this for the glory of your Son until the day he returns. Amen.