



Today we're beginning a summer-long preaching series on the most practical book in the entire bible, the New Testament book of James. If you've ever wished that there was "How To" manual for growing and maturing in faith, this is it. It's my hope and my prayer that by the time the back-to-school sales are really ramping up, our spiritual growth will also be ramping up. And if that isn't enough to pique your interest, then consider these two tidbits.

First, every weekend this summer we're going to be committing a federal crime. That's right – we're going to be reading someone else's mail, a letter written by Jesus' own brother, James. I doubt that James could have imagine that we'd be reading his letter nearly 2,000 years after he wrote it, but I'm sure glad that God preserved it for us.

Second, you should know that our spiritual father, Martin Luther, hated this letter with a passion. Luther advocated strenuously to have James removed from the Bible, but obviously he didn't win that battle. And I'm glad he didn't. Luther insisted that we are saved by faith alone, but James contends that faith without works is dead and cannot save us. We'll untangle that hairball later this summer.

Ready to go? Before we even get started I want to pray that God will use the powerful words of this book to develop a more mature faith in each one of us. Now open up your bible and turn to James 1. We're going to read verses 1-8 and learn how to profit from our pain and our problems [read].

Most people, when they're writing a letter with some delicate subject matter, ease into the tough stuff. You know, like, "Dear Dave, hope this letter finds you well. How's the wife? How are the kids? How was your vacation? Now about that money you owe me...". But James doesn't ease into anything. Right away in verse two he gets right down to business. He says, "When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy." You got problems? Be happy says James. What kind of crazy talk is that?

James is about to give us some bad news, and some good news. Let's start with the bad news. You're going to have problems in life. You're going to experience pain and hardship. It's not a matter of "if"; it's just a matter of "when". Jesus pretty much said that same thing in John 16, "In this world you will have troubles." Not might. Will. That's the bad news. But here's the good news: God can use our problems and our pain to shape our character and deepen our faith. That's how we profit from our pain and problems.

Let me say a couple of things about pain and problems.

First, they're universal. Nobody is immune. It's not that bad or unfaithful people experience pain and problems while good and faithful people get a hall pass. Everyone experiences pain and problems. They're inevitable and universal.

Second, they're not from God. If you only hear me say one thing today, please hear this: your pain and your problems are not God's punishment. Jesus revealed to us that God is the giver of all good things. Our pain and our problems do not come from God. So, where do they come from? Sometimes they come from our own poor choices, like when we make a risky investment and feel the pain of loss. Sometimes our pain and problems come from other people's bad choices, like when a drunk driver chooses to get behind the wheel of a car and kills someone you love. And sometimes our pain and our problems are just the random chance of a chaotic and broken world, like when a warm front and cold front collide and become a violent storm, or when a gene mutates and becomes cancer. There is no explanation. It simply happens.

So, pain and problems are universal. Everyone experiences them. And they don't come from God. They are the result of human choice and random chance. And final thing I'll say about our pain and problems is this: they can be profoundly productive. While God doesn't cause them, James says that God can use our pain and problems to do some amazing things in our lives. Let me share a few of them with you.

Our pain and our problems purify our faith. James uses the word "testing" which refers to the process of putting gold or silver under intense heat until the impurities comes to the surface and can be removed so that only pure gold or silver are left. James is saying that that's what happens to our faith when pain and problems heat up in our lives. They purify us. Christians are a lot like tea bags. You don't know what's inside of them until you drop them into hot water! Another way to put it is that faith is like a muscle, and muscles only grow when they struggle against resistance. That's why our faith grows stronger and is purified through pain and problems.

And that testing, says James, develops patience in us. James says, "When your faith is tested your endurance has a chance to grow." That's so true! I once heard a story about a father who boarded a plane with his infant son. If you've ever flown

with a young child you know it isn't for the faint-hearted! No sooner did the plane leave the runway than the infant started screaming. Not crying, screaming. The father tried everything... pacifier, bottle, burping...but nothing worked. There was nothing for that father to do but put his son on his shoulder and pat his little back. And as he did he soothingly said, "It's OK Albert. Be calm Albert. You'll be alright Albert." After a few minutes a gracious older woman sitting across the aisle, wanting to encourage the father said, "You're such a good dad. How old is little Albert?" To which the father replied. "My son's name is Robert. I'm Albert." Can you relate? If patience is a virtue many of us struggle to be more virtuous, but the virtue of patience only grows in the fertile soil of pain and problems.

And all of that, says James, leads to our spiritual maturity. Listen again to what James says, "For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." Perfect and complete, needing nothing. Would you like those words to describe you as a disciple? I know I would. And James assures us that that is God's ultimate goal for us, a goal that is accomplished through our pain and problems. When carbon is placed under extreme pressure, a diamond is created. When disciples are placed under extreme pressure a mature Christian can be created.

While the work of shaping and maturing us through our pain and problems is ultimately God's work, that doesn't mean that there isn't work for us to do too. So, let me challenge you with three ways to profit through your pain and problems.

First, rejoice. James says, "When trouble comes your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy." Let me put that another way: When life kicks you in the teeth, just smile with the teeth you have left. Pain and problems are inevitable, but our response to them is entirely our choice. Don't misunderstand what James is saying. He isn't saying that we should enjoy suffering. He's not saying that we should hope for pain or pray that we'd have problems. He's saying that we can afford to rejoice in pain and problems because we trust that God can use them to grow us in ways that good times never could. It's like choosing to laugh in the dark of night because we trust that dawn will come. This is not a denial of our grief in hardship, and I don't mean to imply that this is easy. But trusting that God is powerfully and positively at work in our lives especially when times are tough opens the door for us to still live with a sense of joy. Think of it this way – when you're walking a long, hard road you can stare down at your feet and think only how difficult the road is, or you can look up and rejoice that the destination is getting closer. You still have to walk the road, and it's still hard, but the road of pain and problems does lead to a destination called spiritual maturity when we trust God along the way. So, rejoice.

Second, request. Pray. There's no better time to pray than when you've got pain or problems! And what should you pray for? Pray for wisdom. James says, "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he'll give it to you." Pray for wisdom so you won't waste an opportunity to grow. Rather than praying, "God, get me out of this," wisdom would encourage us to pray, "God, grow me through this."

So, when you're dealing with pain and problems rejoice and request. And finally, relax. Stop fighting what you can't control and trust in the One who promises to be at work in even the darkest and most difficult of circumstances. That's what faith is all about. In your bulletin today, in the Daily Readings section, you're going to find a link to a resource on our website called The Welcome Prayer. It's a powerful prayer practice that can help us to both pray and relax in the face of our pain and our problems.

I'm guessing that right now many of you are struggling with some kind of pain or wrestling with some kind of problem. They're right up there with death and taxes! So this week, I challenge you to put James' wisdom into practice. It won't be easy. We're used to running from pain, or distracting ourselves from our problems, or numbing ourselves with drugs, alcohol, food, shopping, hobbies...the list is endless. But this week I want to encourage you to see your pain and your problems differently. This week I want you to rejoice, request and relax, and see how God shapes you and your faith in amazing ways. Let's pray...