

James 1:1-4 Count it all joy... (Leaders Guide)

1. How is suffering approached and thought about in our culture today?

This is intended to simply be a question that will get people thinking about our default approaches to suffering culturally so that we can hear the uniqueness of the Christian message on suffering from James.

Read James 1:1-4

2. James gives us three outcomes of facing trials of various kinds, what are they, and how can various trials bring these realities to the fore in our lives? (Note: The word test is a word that refers to the refining of gold or silver from ore – the process by which it is strengthened)

- i) Testing of our faith – trials have the ability to strengthen, mature, and grow our faith. There may be many examples of this. Loss of love, leads us to find a true love in God. A betrayal of trust in a relationship leads us to deepening trust in a God who will never leave us nor forsake us. A diminishment of joy in a thing or relationship, a transient reality in our lives, leaves us open to finding joy in God that is unrelated to circumstance. Trials can open us up to more of God – more of his love, his joy, his presence. When we face a trial through obedience, trust in God, we learn how it is done such that we are set up for obedience in the face of the next trial.*
- ii) Steadfastness – means "hyper-stand" – a settled disposition, unchanging character and convictions in the face of adversity. Steadfastness is a virtue that helps us face suffering without in marring our character, eroding our convictions. Like in weightlifting when we build muscle to lift more weight. When one adversity is met with steadfastness we are more able to meet the next perhaps greater adversity with steadfastness.*
- iii) Perfect, complete, lacking in nothing – that we would reflect the beauty of the character of Jesus. There are some qualities that are formed in us as human beings only in the crucible of adversity – in the sermon we explored compassion and humility – but there are others that could certainly be considered.*

3. James says we can know joy even in the midst of suffering when we know that these things are the outcome. How is this principle hard to hear in our modern western secular worldview?

This is a question that will harken back to what was discussed in #1. In the sermon Tim spoke about the western secular worldview making us less able to handle suffering than other worldviews. He noted that we are constantly surprised by suffering because we believe humanity is essentially good so we are constantly being surprised by how hateful, bigoted, vengeful, self-centered people can be. Believing we are essentially good we think the universe / God owes us a good life. We also have this unfounded belief that science, medicine, technology should rid our lives of suffering which overpromise and underdeliver. Secular – means lifespan – the belief that this lifespan is all there is. So I have to have my happiness here and now. If anything happens to my love, my career, my money, my health, there is no hope, no future, I am undone.

It would seem the first response to suffering is to do everything possible to get rid of it – even if it means jettisoning convictions and commitments. That suffering can have beneficial impact is often seen as anathema.

Read Mark 3:13-15; 20-21; John 19:25-27; Acts 15:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

4. In the sermon Tim made reference to the life of James (Jesus' younger brother), as a life lived in keeping with this principle. You have just read many of the narrative references or glaring absences of James from the story of Jesus. From the sermon and the references you have just read what changes do you note in James' life, and to what would you attribute it?

I think it would be important to bring to the fore his brother's rejection of him, his absence from the cross such that Jesus asks a disciple to care for his Mom. But then in Act 15 he is giving the last word at the council to decide on how Gentiles will be included in the community of faith as leader of the church in Jerusalem.

It would seem from the references that the turning point for James is Jesus' resurrected appearance to him – It may be helpful to explore how the resurrection brings about this change in James.

Read Hebrews 12:2

5. Facing suffering does not automatically make us better, sometimes it makes us bitter, angry, cold, hard. In the close of the sermon Tim made reference to this passage from Hebrews where we hear that Jesus counted it joy to endure the cross for our sake, that we were the joy that was set before him. How can looking at Jesus and his work for us enable us to count it all joy when we face trials of various kinds?

We are loved. We may not be able to find reasons for our suffering but we can know in light of Jesus it can't be that he doesn't love us – for he gave his life for us.

His death and resurrection gives us the hope of eternal life putting our suffering in the context of eternity.

In Jesus we see the end goal – the perfection of what we are being formed into by the Spirit's work.