

Faith with Hands and Feet
James on Living a Life of Love
James 1.2-4

David Henderson

This morning we begin our semester-long, section-by-section walk through the Book of James, a letter written to Christian believers scattered around the Mediterranean in the first century. You can find it about thirty pages in from the end of the New Testament.

Last week, in his introduction to the book of James, Rob reminded us that, contrary to appearances, the book of James is not just a list of a bunch of rules to follow or laws to obey. It is James showing us how love responds to love.

In a sense, every one of the sermons in this series will be part two of a two-part sermon, and the first part will always be the same – we are loved by God, and we are called to respond to that love with a life of love, and then part two tells us how.

To remind us of that, that each part of this letter is built on the previous truth that we are loved and we are called to live our lives as a response to that love, we've come up with a short reading that we want to use to begin our messages each Sunday.

Would you read it out loud with me?

We are the beloved of the Lord.

In love He created us.
In love He came to us.
In love He died for us.

In love He makes us His own –
folding us into His love
transforming us by His love
sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
by our love this world will see Him in us –
as He lives His life of love in us and through us,
to the glory of God.

Which leads us, this morning, to James chapter one, verse two.

One time, years ago, we drove out to Colorado for a family vacation, our old Suburban loaded up to the roof rack with suitcases and bikes and our four kids.

On our way west we stopped outside of St Louis to get some gas. I quickly filled up the car, jumped back into the Suburban, and promptly backed straight into the Audi TT that was being filled with gas right behind me. We hadn't been in the car for five seconds when – boom.

Kind of like what happens when we start into the letter that James wrote.

In just the *second* verse of the letter – boom, a collision, before we are even ten feet into the journey. We hardly buckle our seatbelts and get moving and we run into this.

James 1.2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

We actually encounter a double collision in the very first sentence.

First, “trials of many kinds.” Wait! What?! What do you mean trials? I thought Jesus was going to rescue me from all that stuff! And how could bad things happen to me? I thought God was in control of everything. How could he let me suffer?

And then a second collision – whenever you experience trials consider it pure joy..” What in the world?! I’m still getting over the fact that I’m going to *have* trials as a Christian, and now I’m being told I should *enjoy* them?

Feel the whiplash of that double collision?

Before we walk back through this passage and look at it more closely, there’s one thing that I think is crucial to point out upfront.

Dealing with difficulties in our lives is one of the hardest things for us to reconcile as Christians who believe in a good and powerful God, especially as Christians who have been raised in the comforts and luxuries of the modern world, such as here in the US.

Where *is* God when I suffer? And what is he up to?

Well, look at this passage again. Notice how often James mentions God in these verses.

Not once.

Which is exactly how it can *feel* when we are going through difficult circumstances. Like God is nowhere to be found.

But now take a closer look. These three verses are filled with action verbs. They describe all kinds of things that are taking place – facing, testing, producing, finishing, making.

These verses also spell out the close at hand agents that are being used to accomplish those actions – trials being allowed to come upon you, trials being used to test you, trials producing perseverance in you, then perseverance being allowed to finish its work, and perseverance being used to make you mature and complete.

Now, whose hands are those tools in? Who is the one who is using those agents, those tools, to fulfill his good and loving purposes?

The passage doesn't say. It doesn't go that last step and name the actor, the One who has those agents in his hands and is using them toward the fulfillment of his ends. But his presence and activity is implied and pointed to in every one of those verbs.

So we can look at the same passage, and read it two different ways. God is absent, he is not in the picture, things are not in his control, and we are left us to fend for ourselves. Or God is there, and actively involved in all things, working for our good.

That two-ways-of-seeing gets at what I'm convinced is the heart of this book, both thematically and literally.

When you flip to the middle of the book of James, to chapter 3, you'll find a key section in which James contrasts two kinds of wisdom. The first kind of wisdom, wisdom from below, is a way of seeing the world that leaves God *out* of the picture. The second kind of wisdom, wisdom from above, is a way of seeing the world that puts God at the *center* of the picture.

As we'll see as we go through this series, that contrast between those two ways of seeing, one that leaves God out of the picture and one that puts God at the center of the picture, is the very thing James is addressing again and again and again in this letter.

When we are at a loss as to what to do, when we encounter need in someone else when we face temptation, when we feel angry or hurt, when things don't go the way we want, when we make plans for the future, when we are sick or grieving, and so on – which will we choose? To include God or not?

This passage we are looking at this morning is a perfect example of those two different ways of seeing.

What about those times when we are facing difficult circumstances? Where *is* God then?

Well, according to the wisdom of this world, the wisdom from below, He's in the same place he is in this passage. He's completely absent. He's nowhere to be seen. We're on our own.

But according to the wisdom from above, where is God in our difficult circumstances? The same place He is in this passage. Everywhere, holding trials in his hands as agents that serve and fulfill his good and loving purposes . . . and holding us in his hands as well.

Lord, give us eyes to see you in all things, and a resolve in all things to keep you at the center of our vision.

Okay, now let's walk back through these three verses and see if we can learn more about how difficult life circumstances can become a tool for good in the hands of a good and loving God.

James 1.2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds . . .

"Trials" is a broad word. It refers to any of the difficulties and challenges we face in life – those specifically connected with living out our faith, and those that just come with living life as broken people in a broken world.

"Facing trials" has less of a sense of standing up against them in a posture of strength, and more of the sense of falling into them in such a way that we become surrounded and overwhelmed by them.

JB Philips puts it, "when all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives." Eugene Peterson translates it, "when tests and challenges come at you from all sides." They both capture the sense that this trouble, these difficulties, this adversity, these afflictions into which we've toppled – they are all we can see, no matter which direction we look.

You know exactly what he's talking about. Friend problems, feeling left out or alone, being misunderstood, struggling financially, facing illness or loss, losing a loved one, and so on.

James says we should consider it *joy* whenever we find ourselves having fallen into such things. It sounds almost absurd. What on earth can he mean?

The word "consider" is an interesting one. It doesn't just mean "think about it in a certain way." It is a word that combines together the idea of valuing or esteeming something, and the idea of cooperating with it, of being willing to be led by it. It's the sort of word that you might use to describe a trusted mentor or a favorite teacher or a close friend.

See your trials as something to be valued and cooperated with, not despised and resisted. James will tell us why we can see them that way in the next two verses.

“Pure joy” is where the verse actually begins in the original language. Those are the first two words, intentionally put by James in the place of emphasis. It isn’t the trials themselves that are a joy. It is an occasion for joy when we recognize our difficulties as tools in God’s hands and we cooperate with the work God is doing in the midst of our struggles and difficulties.

When he speaks of us as brothers and sisters, James reminds us of two important things. First, these words were written from a Christian to fellow followers of Christ, and they won’t make sense to someone who hasn’t experienced the love of God through Christ – bringing about our good *through his suffering* – as their starting point.

But on top of that, in an indirect way, he reminds us that even when we are in the midst of the most horrific challenges and the darkest days, we are never really alone. God has given us each other. I loved when Michael began to wander forward during Rob’s message last Sunday and Rob reminded Anne that we are among family. That’s right. We are family. Which means we are never really alone.

James goes on in verse 3 to tell us why we can have such a remarkable perspective on the hard things that come upon us.

Why can we receive with gladness those moments when we topple headfirst into difficulties? Why can we take the hand of suffering and let it lead us?

James 1.3

. . . because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

This isn’t intellectual knowledge. This is understanding that comes from personal experience. James says, “You’ve experienced this yourself. Look at how God has worked in your lives. Look back at the painful episodes of your life and look at how God has used them when you have drawn him near instead of pushing him away.”

I agree with Doug Moo that the word “testing” isn’t the best choice here. Neither is “trying” or “proving.”

James isn’t saying that trials are a way we’re tested to see if we’ve got what it takes. That sure wouldn’t be reason for joy. The word we should use here, the one that gets at its meaning best, is “refining.” It’s a word filled with hopeful intention and purpose.

Refining and smelting is an ancient process of using a furnace or crucible to heat up metal so hot that it melts. Once it is melted all the impurities rise to the surface where they are skimmed off, so the resulting metal when it cools and hardens again is even stronger and purer than before.

The idea is that going through the heat of difficulties and challenges allows our faith life to become stronger and stronger.

What does all that refining produce? The word translated “produce” is another one of those words in this passage that is filled with a sense of holy purpose. It expresses the idea of something working its way to an intended outcome. It accomplishes something, it leads to something, it brings something about. It’s an elevator that lifts you up and delivers you to the desired destination.

And what is that place? Well, to begin with, we are brought to perseverance – though, as we’ll see in the next verse, that’s just the start.

Persevering is the quality of pressing on when things are pressing you down. Some versions translate this “endurance,” but it is more than that. It is persevering *in the faith*, patiently staying the course *as a Christian*, not just continuing, but continuing *to trust God* even when it is difficult, remaining steadfast *in your devotion to Christ*.

This isn’t celebrating strength indiscriminately. It is celebrating strength *of faith*. Remaining in a posture of reaching for God’s hand even when life is hard. Something that – in trials and suffering – we need to choose to do all over again fifty times a day.

When that happens, when, each time a new difficulty comes, we cling to God anew, then this is what will result. Look at verse 4. This is what it will lead to. This is what it will accomplish.

James 1.4

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Trials lead to persevering faith. But that’s not the final destination. Let your perseverance finish its work.

That verb – let finish – and the next one – that you may be – are in the passive form. The result is not something *we do*. This is describing something that is being done in us and to us and through us while we cooperate.

It’s a lot like holding still when you get a shot. You stay put, receiving the injection in the belief that after the stab of pain something will be at work in you for your own good.

And in fact that’s a really helpful image to have in mind when we suffer difficulties, the idea of God being like a physician. In fact, in Mark 2.17 Jesus encourages us to think about him like a doctor. He says, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”

Twice last year I willingly let a man stick a knife into my back. Why? Because I knew it was ultimately for my own good for those surgeons to do their work.

Doctors are women and men we trust so deeply, even though they are actively causing us pain and discomfort. Why? Because we know that ultimately they desire our best, and whatever they do to us is toward that end.

Our son in law John Matthew Perry, married to our daughter Corrie, is a med student, training to be a pediatrician. When he was here last summer to attend a wedding with Corrie, someone in the wedding party had a little girl who dislocated her shoulder. He went over their house and popped it back in place.

From one perspective, you could say John Matthew went over there and caused a little girl who was already in pain to feel even more pain.

But from another perspective, everything he did to her he did in love, and for her own good. He did what he did to heal her, causing her pain in the moment in order to alleviate her pain in the end, and to restore full and proper function to her body.

It's the same sort of outcome that is taking place in us when we continue to trust God and cling to him in hardship.

First, we become *mature*. It's the Greek word *teleios*, which means we become as God intended us to be from the start. Fully mature like a child grown into adulthood. Fully developed, like an apprentice who becomes a master craftsman. And fully complete and perfect, like a student who has mastered the material and gets a perfect score on the exam.

And second, James says we become *complete*, with nothing lacking, no part missing, nothing unsound or malformed.

I was talking with Aaron, who works at Arconic, before the service. He told me that the other part of the refining and smelting process is the alloying process. After you take out the impurities like lead and make the alumina pure, you add in alloys like copper to make it even stronger. It's referred to as "adding sweeteners." Don't you love that? That's just what's being described in verse 4.

This is fascinating. In a sort of kingdom calculus that only makes sense when God is in the equation, this is addition through subtraction. In God's hands, the refining heat of hardship and difficulty allows my impurities of pride and self-importance and ambition, or resentment and unforgiveness, or lust and greed, or doubt and despair, or whatever else it is to surface and be skimmed off, subtracting them from me, and somehow when that process is complete, I am added to, missing parts filled in, lacking nothing, missing nothing, completely whole, and just as God intended.

Think of how a sculptor works, chipping away all that is not the masterpiece as the artist already sees it in his mind's eye. I love this quote from Michelangelo:

“In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison that lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.”

Mature, complete, lacking nothing. Just as the artist envisioned.

And what exactly does that mean? James and the other writers of Scripture don't leave us guessing about what that means. We are all being sculpted into the same likeness and toward the same end.

We don't have to wonder what God is doing when we find ourselves in difficulties. He has spelled it out for us in his word.

The work that God is doing in every one of us who belongs to him is ultimately the same.

When hardship presses down on us, and we press on in the faith nonetheless, and we press in toward him, reaching for his hand and clinging to God in our trials, then God uses those hardships to press us more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

And as James will remind us in chapter 2 verse 8, that will mean that we will learn to live a life of love.

These are some of the places where God clearly reveals what he is up to when he allows us to experience deep loss or hardship. I only have time to go through these quickly now, but I want to encourage you to pull out your phones and take a picture of this so you can have it to go back and study more closely at another time.

How God uses painful circumstances

- to help us see our need for Him (Psalm 107.10-13)
- to teach us to rely not on ourselves but on Him (II Corinthians 1.8-9)
- to deepen our trust in Him (I Peter 1.6-9)
- to strengthen our hope in the future He has promised (Romans 5.3-5)
- to refine us, helping us grow to spiritual maturity (James 1.2-4)
- to train us up as children of God who resemble our Father (Hebrews 12.5-11)
- to make us more and more like Jesus (Romans 8.17-18, 28-29)
- to equip us to comfort others (II Corinthians 1.3-4)
- to reveal His glory to the world (John 9:1-3)
- to give us more of Himself (Psalm 23.4)

God uses painful circumstances to help us see our need for Him and draw us toward himself.

So God humbled them . . .

They stumbled, and there was no one to help them.

So they cried out to the LORD in their distress. (Psalm 107.10-13)

God uses painful circumstances to show us the limits of our resources, of our own strength and wisdom, and to teach us to rely not on ourselves but on Him.

We think you ought to know . . . about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. (II Corinthians 1.8-9)

God uses painful circumstances to fold us into his arms, to deepen our trust in him and help us to know and rest in the depths of his love.

Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith. . . may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. (I Peter 1.6-9)

God uses painful circumstances to strengthen our hope in the future he has promised to us in Christ, a hope that encompasses both this life and the life to come.

We can rejoice . . . when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. (Romans 5.3-5)

God uses painful circumstances to help us grow spiritually, stretching us in order to strengthen us, forming endurance and patience and peace. (James 1.2-4 – the passage we've been looking at this morning)

God uses painful circumstances to train us up as children of God, shaping us into children who resemble our father, and bringing our lives more in line with his holy purposes.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ... We have all had

human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. ... God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12.5-11)

God uses painful circumstances to make us more and more like Jesus, teaching us to live as Jesus lived and love as Jesus loved.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. . . . And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. (Romans 8.17-18, 29)

God uses painful circumstances to equip us to comfort others, using us to embody his compassion and care for others who find themselves in painful circumstances.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (II Corinthians 1.3-4)

God uses painful circumstances to reveal His glory to the world, putting his beauty and majesty on display, and giving people a bigger picture of God.

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him." (John 9:1-3)

God uses painful circumstances to give us more of Himself.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me. (Psalm 23.4)

Some of you know that every year in January I join together with about a dozen other pastors of similar sized churches in our denomination, and we spend our time wrestling with ministry challenges and sharing ministry ideas and entering into each other's lives and praying for each other.

I just got back from this year's meeting on Friday. This time we invited a deeply respected leader in the denomination, a retired pastor named Sandy Willson, to come

lead our discussions. As he and I were driving to the airport on Friday we were talking about how God uses difficult circumstances and difficult people to form Jesus in us.

I recounted to Sandy that, the night before, one of the pastors in the group had shared with me how God had brought him to the absolute end of himself. After years of success in business he became a pastor and was making a mess of everything he did. He was ready not only to quit that position, but to leave ministry. He would stay up for hours every night, pacing in his room, crying out to God, and eventually came to a place of saying, "I just can't do this," and God said, "Finally. Are you ready to let me be everything to you?" He said yes, and that marked a turning point into ministry of incredible fruit and faithfulness, as well as far greater humility and yieldedness and freedom.

And that morning, I was driving with another person in our group and he shared how he had been blasted by a woman and her father in his congregation as he was seeking to lead her and her family through the aftermath of the terrible public suicide of her husband, and how the one thing he thought he did well as a pastor, which was to offer comfort to people in hard situations, was being called into question and mocked. As a result, on the other side of that devastating failure, he finally began to fully detach his identity from his calling and establish it in Christ alone, which is leading to new joy and freedom in Christ.

And I shared with him two incredibly hard seasons of ministry for me that led to my throwing myself wide open to God and inviting his deeper work in me, and which resulted in my growing in character and carrying out my ministry with far greater joy and freedom and love and faithfulness.

Sandy sat up in his seat and spun to look at me, his eyes wide, a huge childlike grin on his face, and full of passion, he said, "Is there any other way? I mean really? Isn't it true that our *only* progress toward Christlikeness comes as God allows us to walk through difficulties?"

That's certainly my experience.

In her book *The Dialogue*, like an early version of *Jesus Calling*, written in the 1300s, in the midst of the plagues that struck Europe and took the lives of so many, Catherine of Siena pictures God saying this:

I send people troubles in this world so that they may know that their goal is not this life, and that these things are imperfect and passing. I am their goal, and I want them to want me, and in this spirit they should accept such things.

James 1.2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Some questions as we close . . .

What sort of hardship do you find yourself facing right now?

Where is God in your suffering? Are you leaving him out of the picture, or are you letting him have his place at the center, and seeing everything with reference to him?

How are you doing at continuing to reach out to him and cling to him even when your breath is taken away by the pain of all that surrounds you and brings you down?

Where are you seeing evidence of God at work, even in these painful circumstances in which you find yourself?

In what way, in addition to everything else God is doing, in what way are you experiencing God giving you himself?

What is God saying to you?

Benediction: Romans 15.13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.