

Sermon 12/27/09

James 1: 2-12

Focus > 2 verses:

(vs.2) “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*”

(vs.12) “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*”

Bookends.... complementary & overlapping....also = memory verses

BTW..y ou know I’m taking a risk preaching on this subject, don’t you?

You may remember Pastor Ben preached through the letter to James spring of 2008.

In fact, he devoted one whole sermon to verse 12....

NOW DON’T GO BACK & LISTEN TO IT ONLINE...

I know if you do that, I’m going to suffer by comparison.

Strikes me: starts by referring to the recipients of this letter as “my brothers”

Obviously – Every one of us are individuals different in almost all ways....

....Our age or upbringing & background, education, **status in this world**...our jobs...or **race & cultural heritage**.....we are all different in almost every way

But in one way...in the one way that matters most...we are all very much the same:

We all have faith in Jesus Christ. **So did the people James is writing to.**

No – he didn’t know each one personally,

...and NO: he couldn’t see their hearts ... he couldn’t vouch for the faith of each one

...but based on their common profession of faith in Jesus...

....he calls them “my brothers”.

The Greek word is ‘*adelphos*’ and though it does mean physical brother, the common NT usage refers to a fellow-believer, a fellow-Christian.... either male or female.
a fellow-kinsman in the faith....

So... we too in this room all share a common profession of faith

....to the best of my knowledge, we share in this treasure of Jesus Christ

.... you and I are brothers....& sisters

& since we all hold onto a common faith in Jesus as our Lord & Savior....

...then I know it must also be true every one of us meets trials of various kinds....

.....and the faith of every single one of us is being tested.

We will...every one us...we will all have us faith tested & purified –
..and it is not easy...its not fun....it hurts.

Proverbs calls it a “crucible”Isaiah calls it “a furnace of affliction”

For some of us, 2009 has been a profound year...and it has tried & tested our faith.

As I look around this room, I know the trials that many of you face.

A few of us have faced the death of someone we love...**but** we have held onto our faith.
Some of us have endured illnesses or lost our jobs or faced emotional setbacks or have had our families rocked by one thing or another....

We have been kicked when we were down...**but** we have held onto our faith.

I know is an experience we all share – or will share....

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness

It sounds so strange...it sounds paradoxical, doesn't it?

.....But there is much in the Christian life that is paradoxical...

The Christian faith turns the world's values upside down...it is counter-cultural.
We see things differently.

I love this quote by CS Lewis: *I believe in Christianity like I believe in the sun; not only because I can see it, but because by it, I can see everything else.*

The command to “count it joy”....fits into that category

...it means that we should regard or consider or see trials as good things.

Paul thought like that....and so did Peter:

(Rom 5:3-5) Paul said,”...*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*”

(1 Peter 1:6-8) Peter said: “*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*”

Of course trials are not pleasant to us now....Peter just said they can “grieve” us

When speaking of trials from **the perspective of their disciplinary benefit**, Hebrews says:

*“For the moment all discipline **seems** painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* (Heb 12:11)

Do you see the common theme in all these scriptures?

It is seeing or considering what lies ahead that enables us to endure our present trials...
...by looking at the goal; we can happily run this race.... we endure with joy.

That’s why we are to consider or regard trials from a mature & spiritual perspective...

So when he says, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds...”*

That doesn’t mean that every cloud has a silver lining...it means that we should look upon trials as “nothing but joy.”...“pure joy”

It means there isn’t a cloud.

It is true that as Christians we are sometime subject to adversities as a result of our faith. Sometimes we are treated unjustly – whether we know it or not –

....sometimes we are mocked
....,simply because we belong to Him....and we are not ashamed of the name of Jesus.

BUT....sometimes it seems to us as though our trials are common to all people...millions of Americans lost their jobs ... millions lost loved ones

...but I think this is exactly what James meant when he said “trials of various kinds”

...and what Hebrews is getting *they produce fruit to those who have been trained by it*

For the believer, there is only one Source. ...Only One Reason things happen.

.....We know He works “all things together” for our good.

We know that every hardship we face – **whether unique to the Christian or common to mankind** – is ordained & given to us from the hand of a Father who loves us.

Hardships & discipline are not **punitive, but are redemptive** and actually produce *righteousness & holiness in us*

AND....

Count it all joy.“**For**” - meaning **because** - *the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*

And now verse 12 says: *“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”*

Do you see how v.2 & v.12 are complementary? (...supplement & complete each other?)

Trials produce steadfastness...& a steadfast faith results in eternal life...here: “crown...”

Both verses use the same 3 words to make the point...they’re the same in the Grk. too

- **Trial**...some older translations use the word **temptation**, meaning an *enticement* to sin...and it can mean that; there is **overlap**: *obviously temptations to sin also try our faith*.....but here the main meaning is of **hardships** that come on us from the *outside....external afflictions*
- **Test**....**GOD** *gives* us trials to test & purify our faith. They’re not *things that just happen to us*.

You’ve all heard of the comparison between trials & the process of refining gold or silver...it is put in a crucible and into a furnace where impurities are burned away.

(Luke 17:5-6) “*The apostles said to the Lord, “**Increase** our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”*”

One observation I can make from that is that it is not the amount or size of our faith that is of value....but the purity of it. It is not the quantity of faith; but the quality.

By sending us trials, Jesus is answering **a need we really have...and seldom recognize.**

The third word that occurs in both verses is steadfast or steadfastness....

....used as both noun & verb

Often translated as “endures” ; NT records Jesus saying three times when speaking of persecution: “...*but the one who endures to the end will be saved.*”

Doctrinally - what we’re talking about is called the perseverance of the saints.

But perseverance is a 2-sided coin, right?

...we must understand that our perseverance is based on God’s preservation

Yes...we see language in the Bible like “**strive** to enter through the narrow gate” and “**make every effort** to supplement your faith with virtue & knowledge & self-control” etc.

This is perseverance.

On the other hand....

I could give you a dozen scriptures that emphasize God’s promise to preserve us...

...but I’m only going to give you one:

(John 10:27)

“*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*”

You know....there are some who will read a verse like that and act as though our reward *of eternal life* is **automatically** given to us in some sort of **mechanical** or **routine** way.

Don't be deceived: God's preservation of us doesn't make our perseverance unnecessary;
....it makes it possible.

We tend to separate perseverance & preservation & see them as 2 different things...
But that is not the way the Bible sees them and not the way Paul talks about them...

I love how he puts it in Philippians: "...*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*"

And in speaking of his ministry to the Colossians he writes: "*For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*"

Him Enabling us to persevere in the faith is the **means** God uses to preserve us.

So...we work...we toil...we struggle...and we persevere in faith....
....against all sorts of temptations, persecutions and hardships.

It doesn't mean we never sin... or we never want to strike back...
It doesn't mean we never get discouraged...
We do stumble, but we never fall overboard...

The final perseverance of believers is the ultimate proof that we have been truly born again....and called by the Holy Spirit.

If there is one unmistakable mark of a Christian – it is our perseverance in the faith.

- As long as we have faith Jesus Christ & the love he displays cross on Calvary...
- As long as we trust in Jesus and He remains our only hope for salvation...

Then we are assured that he will raise us up on the last day, as He has promised.

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

That's a **beatitude**, right?

All the beatitudes start with that declaration of 'blessedness'....
Greek word is "*markarios*"...it means 'fortunate'...'happy'....blessed.

In Matthew 5, Jesus declares you happy & ... blessed "*...when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

And so here James tells us to “**count it all joy**” & affirms that happy & “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*”

(2) very quick points to make & then a very practical exhortation:

First: “*great reward in heaven*” that Jesus promised is here described as a “*crown of life*”.

Listen to what Jesus says in Revelation to the church in Smyrna:

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

It’s a way of describing eternal life...a way of describing heaven.

It’s not a royal crown; it’s a victor’s crown or wreath...

.... that would be rewarded to someone who won an athletic event.

Paul uses that picture...and very similar language...in the last letter he wrote:

“...the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

Second, James tells us this “crown of life” has been promised by God *to those who love Him*...Paul said that “*crown of righteousness*” awaits *all who have loved his appearing*.

These phrases help us “define” or understand heaven just a little bit better.

Heaven is for those who love Him....loved His appearance

If you think of heaven as some beach somewhere, or vacationland, or a golf resort...or I don’t-know-what...then you need to re-examine yourself, brother...sister.

Hebrews says: “*...without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*”

If you are one of those who seek him...how do you suppose that God will reward you? If your hearts desire is Him, don’t you think He will reward you with what you want?

So...I ask myself: Is He my treasure...am I seeking Him?

Do I love Him?

I said I would close with a practical exhortation...

I appreciate this opportunity to preach on the last Sunday in 2009.

...and I appreciate this opportunity to encourage you for 2010.

This is going to sound a lot like making a **New Year's resolution**, but that's okay isn't it?
.....as long as our resolutions are Christ-centered and not self-centered

God established 24 hour-periods that it takes Earth to make one rotation....
... He established (365) 24-hours periods that it takes Earth to make one revolution
around the sun.

(Gen 1:14) God said, "*Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years....*"

In a way.... in seems to me as though God gives us *days and years*...to signal a fresh opportunity or a new beginning...
....we are creatures...we are tied to these time-periods

Every morning when we get up, we can say (as Paul said): "...*forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way*"
(Phil 3)

Brothers & sisters, let us think this way...let's *strain forward*...let's *press on*....

My exhortations to you are well-known...nothing you don't know or haven't heard...
....but let's resolve anew & re-commit ourselves to them

Let's do those things that will make 2010 a year of revival in our own hearts....

3 things....

- Let's pray. Prayer may be the most difficult of spiritual disciplines to maintain. So many of us feel so inadequate when we try to pray. We want to say – like the disciples said: "Teach us to pray!"...but let's resolve to practice prayer every day. As Mike spoke to us last week, as adopted sons of God, we are in a family relationship; please...brothers & sister...let's talk to our Father every day. **Pray.**
- #2....Let's listen to our Father every day & read the Bible. I know some of you say that you're not a reader...or you don't understand it...I guess there's a hundred things I could say, but let me just say this – and it may be a bad example – BUT: the first time Gloria dragged me into the National Gallery of Art, I was unwilling; I don't know anything about art and I didn't "understand" it...but somehow those hours I spent in front of masterpieces effected me....it couldn't not effect me. The Word of God acts like that on a much deeper level. Jesus prays for us: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." Read your Bible and resolve to memorize our Fighter verses.
- Lastly, fellowship with the rest of your family **AT LEAST** by making the first day of the week a day when you celebrate what your elder brother Jesus accomplished for you. I know: I'm **preaching to the choir when I'm tell those in church that they should go to church**....but there's more: **commit to Sunday School....commit to a small group.** Some of us started well, but we're not so diligent anymore. Let's resolve to make 2010 a year different...**not that we do** any of these things **to gain merit or to check of duties**....but **only to nurture the things that help us to love Him more.**