

Faith That Works // The Tale of Three Men

James 1:9-18

The book of James is all about a faith that works in us, but it doesn't *just* work in us. It's a faith that gets to work, a faith that gets after it. James' faith is one of the most compelling arguments for the reality of Jesus' resurrection, because for all of Jesus' ministry, James denied Jesus. He couldn't believe that his half-brother could actually be God, but when Jesus rose from the dead, James went from being one of the strongest doubters and mockers of Christ, to leading the church in Jerusalem and was eventually killed as a result of his faith in his Brother. That doesn't happen unless he saw something that could radically change his mind.

After James witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he began leading the church in Jerusalem with the other apostles and he wrote this letter to Jewish believers who were facing difficulty and persecution for their faith. Pastor Rob made the point that we can't be spiritually fruitful...we cannot have a deep and genuine faith in Christ...without becoming spiritually mature. And maturity doesn't come when life is easy. It comes with trial and challenge, and James is teaching us that those trials produce in us a deep trust in God's faithful hand to shape us into the image of Christ.

James 1:9-18, "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. 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. Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

The Tale of The Low Man (or of Humble Circumstances)

James 1:9, "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation..."

At some point in our lives, every single one of us has been faced with the disappointment of not getting what we want. We feel humbled by our circumstances, and James tells the low man to boast, meaning that normally we wouldn't do that. Typically when things get tough, we can fall into disappointment and despair. For some of us this disappointment comes from a place of financial privilege. We don't have the car, or the house, or the acreage, the nice clothes that we want...but things aren't as bad as they could be...somebody out there probably has it worse...but we still wish we had more. For others it comes from a real place of financial poverty. We've gone through seasons of life where the bills stacked so high or the paychecks didn't come through, and we weren't even able to keep food on the table...how did we even survive?

For others, it might not be connected to our material possessions at all. Our sense of poverty might come from not having the relationship we wanted, or not getting the promotion we thought we deserved, or not getting the recognition we were owed, or not getting the diagnosis we had hoped for. And regardless of what it is that caused these "Humble Circumstance," we've given in to the temptation of believing that we're worthless because we don't have what we want. We've fallen into despair.

Our disappointment with our finances, or relationships, or the sickness that just won't go away, trial after trial, we can't seem to catch a break...and at some point, we're tempted to just give up on hope because we think life doesn't have value or meaning or purpose based upon our present circumstances.

James says that way of thinking is FALSE! If you find yourself in humble circumstances, if you find your life lacking...don't give up! Don't give into despair! The world wants to tell you that the good life is a life of comfortable circumstances, but James says, *"take pride in the fact that your worth or value doesn't come from what you have!"* The tale of the low man is that your story is not defined by your health, wealth or prosperity. Your life and value and worth and purpose are defined by someone SO MUCH BETTER.

That's an easy truth to say, but a hard reality to live because many of us relate to...

The Tale of The Rich Man

James 1:10-11, "...and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits."

Now, James is literally talking about material wealth, and notice that James isn't saying that it's evil or wrong to have money, but he's pointing to the reality that everything we have, everything we are rich in, will pass away. We might be rich in money, rich in health, rich in youth, rich in beauty, rich in strength, rich in talents or capabilities, rich in knowledge, rich in wonderful relationships of friends and family... But James' point is that whatever you have an abundance of...it will ALL fade away.

It's hard to realize how much we take for granted until we don't have it anymore. When I got sick, I didn't realize how thankful I was for my health until it was gone. I realized that I'm not as grateful for it as I should be. And if we've given into the idea that our lives are valuable because we have much... or maybe you've come out of poverty...you used to not have what you want but now you do and now you're secure...James' point is that it's all FALSE security. He says, if you're rich in anything, don't fall into pride. There is no real security for us in the things of this life because just like when "the sun rises with its scorching heat and it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits." Whether we relate more with the tale of the low man or the tale of the rich man, the reality is that we all face the temptation to find the value of our life in what we have. And we can recognize this simply by looking at the way we react when the things we care about start to slip through our fingers.

When you and I are faced with the reality of how finite this life really is, it hurts! It humbles us! And James is essentially telling us, if your story is the tale of the low man... if you're down, crushed, or in bad circumstances, be confident! GOD LOVES YOU AND IS FOR YOU! If you feel humiliated by life, remember and celebrate that everything that belongs to Jesus belongs to you if you've put your faith in Him...boast in your exaltation! Boast in the fact that God has not given up on you, He cares for you, He desires to give you a life filled with love, joy, and peace, regardless of your circumstances

If your story is the tale of the rich man—if you're fortunate without issue or problem: remember the fact that these materials or things you value are not what make you rich. If you're proud of the life you have, remember and rejoice in the fact that apart from Christ, you are nothing...boast in your humiliation! Because at the end of the day, we are all finite. We all have an expiration date. The things that are here today could be gone tomorrow. Everything we have and everything we are, it's all finite, but Jesus Christ is infinite. James is showing us that the gospel levels the playing field. Our worth or blessedness is not defined by our circumstances. And he spends the rest of this passage telling us:

The Tale of The Blessed Man

James 1:12, "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."

The word that James uses to talk about trials or testing is the same word that was used to describe the smelting process of precious metals. For example, when my golden wedding ring was extracted from the earth, it didn't come out of the ground like this. It was a rock, full of other kinds of dirt, metals, and other elements. And that rock had to be melted down into a liquid form so that all the other elements could rise to the top and be separated from it. Once those impurities were removed from the gold, the gold was purified and cleansed and shaped by its creator. Do you see the picture of our life with Christ? Suffering and trials are something that will test if our faith is genuine. They will bring out all of the impurities and make or break the authenticity of our faith. They are the things our Creator uses to mold and shape us. And notice that James doesn't say that we might go through trials...as if it's a possibility...he is speaking as if this testing process will happen to all of us! Jesus Himself made a very similar promise...

John 16:33, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

The Pagan religions surrounding the people James was writing to at this time taught that people needed to do things for the gods so the gods would help them avoid suffering. Pagan religion was all about doing favors or rituals for the divine in order to get favors in return. If you didn't do the favors, you got punished. Jesus on the other hand suffered to bring redemption into the world. Redemption came THROUGH suffering...just like the purity of gold comes through fire. And the problem for us

today is that when we read a book like James, it confronts how deeply impacted we are by the culture around us. We live in a society that avoids suffering at all cost.

"We live in a secular society that says this world is all there is. Do you know what that means? If you lose love here, if you lose happiness here, if you lose anything here, there's no consolation. You've lost all meaning, all happiness, everything. It's gone. Our culture says if you suffer, you need to sue, because suffering is absolutely not the way it should be. Somebody screwed up, and it can't be you. Or maybe it is you, but the point is that things are supposed to be good. Everything's got to be good because this world is all there is."

- (Tim Keller, <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/a-society-of-suffering/>)

Do you see the reality of that? That mindset has invaded every area of our society! If I'm honest with you, I struggle with this. Sometimes my focus is only on the discomfort of the present moment, and not on the promises of eternity. And for any of us that are over the age of 18 that struggle with this, can we not hear this and help but wonder why Gen Z is called "The Most Anxious Generation"? We've convinced them with our actions that this world is all they have hope in, and they're realizing that it's fading away.

One major issue that many of us who have grown up in this secular society struggle with is the problem of pain: if God is so good, how can there possibly be so much pain and suffering in the world? And if this world is all there is, if the only hope we have is in this life, then that's a fair question. Because many of us have seen how painful and detrimental suffering can be. Suffering isn't a good thing. It isn't enjoyable, and as Christians, when we look at God's creation of humanity and His intentions for humanity, we realize that suffering is not the way it should be! If this life is all we have to hope for, then suffering will absolutely destroy you. But as Christians, even though pain and suffering aren't things God intended for us at Creation, we see that ironically, He still uses them for good. Because if anyone in all the universe could have avoided suffering, it was God, and yet He chose to enter into the deepest form of suffering in order to bring about the greatest good the world has ever known.

Romans 8:28-29, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son..."

The gift of suffering isn't suffering. The good part of difficult circumstances isn't the difficulty. The best part about gold going through the refiner's fire isn't that it gets melted down...it's the way the Creator uses that process to bring out the very best in it! We don't suffer for the sake of suffering. God doesn't sit in Heaven and cause every bad thing to happen. He never intended for sin to do the damage it does to our lives. But the goodness of God and the message of the Gospel is that in spite of all the pain, and darkness and death we see in the world, we know that God is using every single circumstance for the good of those who love God. He lets none of it go to waste, and He uses all of it to make us more like Jesus, because that's who we were made to be! When we avoid suffering, we avoid the opportunity to look like Jesus. But what if we, as the church, could follow Jesus' example and show the next generation a better way? What if we could show them the kind of life that God intended for them from the foundation of the world? What if we, as 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, and 80 somethings could model for the younger generations a life that is not dictated or determined by circumstances, but a life that remains steadfast, and presses on toward heaven and shines like pure gold, even when things get hard? You might be saying, *well Dylan that sounds great. I'd love to remain steadfast no matter what, even when trials come, but I don't even know where to start.* I believe James spends the rest of this section teaching us how to do just that.

James 1:13-15, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

If this life is all we have to hope for, then so often when suffering comes it doesn't make us better people. It makes us worse. It makes us bitter, angry, and self-obsessed. If suffering is the end of the story, then it makes us worse. And it's no wonder that our world is riddled with addicted people who are just trying to medicate their pain. Whatever it is, we all chase after these pseudo-satisfiers to try and numb out the reality that life is hard. And for many of us, when things don't go our way, we tend to immediately shift the blame of our circumstances onto God.

For all of us, whether it's when we face illness, or tremendous loss, or whatever it may be, we tend to cry out "WHY GOD!?" as if He is the one causing the evil and the pain we are experiencing in our lives. But notice what James says, "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." James is saying the difference between suffering that turns you to gold and suffering that turns you to despair has to do with how you handle your desires. The original Greek word James uses to talk

about our desires that lead to sin means disproportionate desires. These are desires that have gotten out of control and become the most important things in our lives. So, James is saying if you love having control more than you love God, if you love validation and acceptance more than you love God, if you love a person more than God, if you love money, or health, or comfortable conditions more than God, then when suffering comes, and it will come, your disordered desires for those things will lead to sin. They lead to the bitterness, the jadedness, the anger, the self-obsession that comes when suffering brings out your worst. And those things feel like and lead to death if we let them become ultimate. If this life is all we have, then there is no reason to remain steadfast under trial. But for those of us who have put our faith in Christ, this life is not all we have.

Romans 6:22-23, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Our question, as followers of Jesus, is not, "God, why is this happening to me?" Our question should be, "God what are you trying to form in me?" James closes this section by saying,

James 1:16-18, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

On January 8, 1956, at 28 years old, while attempting to make contact with a native tribe in Ecuador, Jim Elliot and four other missionaries were speared to death; slain by those they came to minister to. Elliot's most famous words were written in a journal entry 6 years prior while he was a student at Wheaton.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

- Jim Elliot

About a year after his death, his wife Elizabeth went on to live amongst the tribe that killed her husband and many of them came to know Christ and now live as a peaceful tribe. The Elliot's understood that every good and perfect gift is from God. And whether we have much or we have little, the fact that we even have breath in our lungs is a gift that God has given us.

James 1:12, "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."

What if we stopped looking at the gifts we have, or the suffering we face, or the situation we're in as what makes our life have worth, and started looking to find our worth in the one who Gives us life? The tale of the blessed man, and the story Jesus wants to write in our own lives is that we can be a people who remain steadfast under trial if we cling to Jesus because He remains steadfast. In Him there is no variation. He doesn't shift like a shadow. He is a constant anchor that doesn't move throughout the storms of life. Remaining steadfast in the storm or the trial doesn't mean perfection. It just means you take what you're going through and give it completely to God. You stand in Him! Because ultimately, it's His power in us that makes us able to stand.

In Elizabeth Elliot's account of her husband's life, she writes that on the last day of their lives, Jim Elliot and his friends stood on the beach, and they sang a song,

"We rest on thee, our Shield and our Defender!
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in thy strength, [and] safe in thy keeping tender,
... [It's] in [your] name we go"

James tells us that the tale of the blessed man isn't that he pulled himself up by his bootstraps. The tale of the blessed man is that he remained steadfast because he loved God more than anything else...even his own comfort! We cannot remain steadfast unless the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, and empowers us, and sanctifies us to stay faithful when trial comes our way! Our lives are simply meant to be a constant submission into the hands of our Creator, like gold in the hands of the Refiner. When we place our life and surrender everything into His hands to form us however He wants to, He brings out the beauty of His image in us so that others may see Him and know His goodness. The question we have to ask ourselves this morning is, "whose hands are forming me?"

Are we letting our circumstances form us? Are we letting our own disordered desires form us? Or have we willingly placed ourselves in the hands of a good, loving, and steadfast Creator? If you've still got air in your lungs, death doesn't get to have the final say over you.

God wants to REDEEM every part of your story. And the only way He can start doing that, is if we're willing to move toward Him by doing our part, and repent. We can't redeem or repair our story. Only God can. But we can repent. We can change the way we show up. It starts with turning away from what we've allowed to distort us and turning toward Him to let Him form us.