

Good Things from Bad

Message for Sunday, January 5, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: James 1:2-4, 9-12

Children's Message: Bring some of the weights I've been using, some light (which they can try) and some very heavy. Demonstrate a few exercises.

What would you think of me if I said I wanted to grow stronger, but I never exercised, or maybe just practised by lifting these balloons? Pretty silly, eh?

In order for my muscles to grow, I have to make them work. *Do a couple of curls using a balloon as the weight. Then do the same curl with the heavy weight so they can see the biceps muscles contracting.*

Here's the point: in order for the muscles to grow stronger, they need something heavy pushing against them.

There are things even more important than having strong muscles, though. Like being a caring person, or having faith in God. But exercise works here, too.

Suppose God wants to help me be more caring, to love other people more. Here's a surprise: the best way to become more caring and loving would be for me to meet someone who isn't very nice, whom no one likes. It would be hard to love someone like that, wouldn't it? I'd have to work at it. I might even have to *force* myself to reach out and become a friend.

Something to think about: next week when you start back to school, keep your eyes open. Maybe God has someone that he wants you to love, even though it's going to be hard. Do it anyway.

Message "Good things from bad"

Introduction to Bible reading

How would you feel if someone was snooping through your mail? Back in December, police in Saskatoon stopped a stolen car and arrested the two women inside. The police also found inside the car several large bags containing hundreds of pieces mail; all the envelopes were addressed to other people, and all had been opened.

Hey, if someone wants to pay your bills, I'm sure you wouldn't mind that. But some of your mail is personal and private, meant for your eyes only.

Today we're going to read someone else's mail! Don't worry; it's OK. In fact, it will be helpful for us, as we discover that Christians two thousand years ago struggled with many of the same issues we deal with today. Starting today and over the next couple of months, we're going to read the letter from James in the Bible.¹

1) Bad things will happen

James 1:1-2, New Living Translation:

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is written to Jewish Christians scattered among the nations.

Greetings!

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy.

Like any letter, James begins this one with a greeting to the readers. But then he gets right down to business: "Whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy." The *New International Version* translates that phrase as "Consider it pure joy"!!!

When I read that, my first impression was "Wow, what faith!" I was really, well, impressed.

Then I began thinking... "How dare he! What does he know about the troubles that other people may be

¹ There are several James mentioned in the New Testament. One was the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19), who first scoffed at Jesus as the Messiah (John 7:5; Mark 3:21), but who later became a leader of the church in Jerusalem, along with Peter (see Acts 12:17; Acts 15:13; Acts 21:18 for examples of his leadership role). Another James was the

apostle who was the twin brother of the apostle John; he was killed early on (Acts 12:1). A third James, the son of Alphaeus was also an apostle (Matthew 10:2), but we know nothing at all about what happened to him. I am working on the understanding that the letter of James was written by James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

facing? What gives him the right to speak like that?" I was full of righteous indignation.

Then I stopped and considered two things.

a) James *does* know about trouble

James begins this way because that's where his readers were at. For the early Christians, life was full of persecution, trouble, danger... and also joy.

1 John 3:13, New Century Version:

Brothers and sisters, do not be surprised when the people of the world hate you.

1 Peter 4:12-13, Today's English Version:

My dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful test you are suffering, as though something unusual were happening to you. Rather be glad that you are sharing Christ's sufferings.

We don't know this for sure, but early church history indicates that James was killed for his faith. So he knew what he was talking about.

Charles Colson, on his radio talk show in the US, was interviewing a couple who had been part of the underground church in the Soviet Union during the era when the state stamped out any sign of religion. They were terribly persecuted: they lost their jobs, the heat was turned off in their apartment, and the police harassed them. Colson asked them, "We here in the west have often taken our freedom of worship for granted. How did you feel when you were made to suffer like that for your faith?"

They answered, "We thought it was normal. Everything we read in the Bible told about all the hardships and troubles which Christians have. When the same thing happened to us, we just assumed it happened to Christians everywhere."

b) God speaks to us through the Bible

2 Timothy 3:16 says "All Scripture is inspired by God" — literally "breathed by God." What that means to me is that as James was writing this letter, he was guided by the Holy Spirit in what he put down. It wasn't like taking dictation word for word, but God gave him the ideas, and he put them into his own words and style.

So it's not just James telling us to cheer up when we're down. God is saying this to us. That puts a

whole different perspective on things. It's not so much a command that makes you feel guilty because you don't have that kind of faith, but more of an encouragement to give you hope. After all, if God is for you, then all things are possible. Now, back to that verse...

Notice that James doesn't say, "If trouble comes your way..." Instead he says, "*Whenever* trouble comes your way..." You can count on having problems in your life. So when they come, don't bother demanding answers from God, how could he allow such a terrible thing. If you're not having any problems in your life, you need to check your pulse.

2) How problems can help you

The next few verses tells us how what seem like bad things can actually bring good into our lives.

James 1:3-4, New Living Translation:

For 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 strong in character and ready for anything.

God's purpose in your life is to build you up, to make you grow.

How does God teach you endurance (another word for patience)? By giving you everything you want? By making sure that everything goes your way? Absolutely not!

I'll say it again, differently: God is much more interested in your character than your comfort. God's number one purpose for your life is to make you more like Jesus Christ. Like I said with the children, we don't grow spiritual muscles by using balloons.

3) How you can help yourself

Verse 3 says, "When your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow." Troubles give your faith, endurance and character "a chance" to grow. This is not a sure thing. I know, and I'm sure you do as well, people who have gone through very similar circumstances. One person comes out of it bitter, cursing God and full of self-pity. The very same thing happens to another person, and that

person turns out content, even more full of faith in God, and confident to face any other trouble which may come along.

Why the difference between these two people? The forces pressing on them from the outside were the same. It must have been what was on the inside that made the difference. Our faith, our attitude, our trust in God—these are the things that make the difference.

Victor Frankl, the Jewish psychologist who spent time in the Nazi concentration camps in Germany said, “They stripped me naked. They took everything—my wedding ring, my watch. I stood there naked and all of a sudden I realized at that moment that although they could take everything away from me—my wife, my family, my possessions—they could not take away my freedom to choose how I was going to respond.”

That’s the key: it’s your choice to rejoice. God says, “Consider it pure joy”—but it’s up to you to decide whether or not you’ll live that way.

Here’s another verse which says much the same thing.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, New International Version:
Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Notice that it doesn’t say give thanks *for* your circumstances. Why should you be thankful that you’ve got cancer? That you just lost your job? No, it says that even *in* your worst troubles, you can still have joy, you can still know the love and the strength of God, you can still be thankful.

Debra Johnson of Dublin, Ohio sent this note to *Christian Reader* magazine. “My seven-year-old daughter wanted to take violin lessons, so I took her to a music store to rent an instrument. Hoping she would understand the importance of practising, I explained that violin lessons were expensive so she would have to work hard.

“There may be times when you feel like giving up,” I said, “but I want you to hang in there and keep on trying.”

She nodded and then in her most serious voice said, “It will be just like marriage, right Mommy?”

You see, your problems will either make you bitter or better. The difference between bitter and better is the letter “I”. I make the difference—my attitude.

4) The prize at the end

If all your life’s work is for things that will crumble to dust in a few years, what’s the point? How much better to focus on things that are eternal.

James 1:12, New Living Translation:

God blesses the people who patiently endure testing. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

There’s a saying, “They’re so heavenly minded, they’re no earthly good.” But that doesn’t have to be true. When your mind is focussed on heaven, then you’re not overwhelmed when things go wrong. You see the big picture. You have strength and faith to go on, knowing that your work is not in vain.

Next Steps

- Pray: Choose now that you will put your trust in God, no matter what happens. Then, when troubles come, you’re on a solid foundation.
- Be aware of God’s presence with you through it all. Know that you are not alone; depend on his strength.