

IRL, Better Not Bitter, James 1:1-12, 9/24/23

I wonder if any of you had an older brother or sister who cast a large shadow? Maybe they were a great athlete, in all AP classes, popular? Well the author of the book we are studying for the next several weeks, James, can certainly relate to you. In fact, his older brother is the most famous, wisest, most accomplished person that ever lived, James' brother was Jesus. Can you imagine what it must have been like growing up as kids having Jesus as your older brother? You are playing catch in the house and James breaks mom's favorite lamp, and later she comes into the room and says, "Does anyone know how my lamp got broken?" And James is like, "It wasn't me." Jesus looks at him and says, "James, I know all things. The truth will set you free."

But for James, living in the same house with Jesus, sharing the same bathroom, eat the same food, getting Jesus' hand-me-downs... sometimes familiarity breeds contempt as the saying goes. James had his doubts, he was a skeptic on the fringes of Jesus' ministry. Could it really be that my own brother, my own flesh and blood is God in flesh, the promised Messiah? But everything changed the first Easter morning when Jesus rose from the dead. James not only came to faith in Jesus, he soon became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and a great influencer for the Gospel, and the James who wrote this letter we are going to be studying for the next 5 weeks, and introduces himself as *James the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

Many Bible historians put the writing of this letter very early in the life of the church, likely 47AD. James' original audience for this letter is given to us in the opening- *To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings*. Who are the 12 tribes? He's referring to the 12 tribes of Israel, particularly the Jewish Christians who because of persecution were forced to flee from Jerusalem and were scattered across the Roman Empire. Imagine what that must have been like for these Jewish Christians, imagine having to uproot your family, and detach from your community and culture you love, from neighbors and friends, from the place your family may have lived in for centuries and taking as much as you could fit onto your donkeys or caravan and trekking out as a refugee to an unknown land and people. This was the situation for many of the early Jewish converts to Christianity. And it is precisely why James begins his letter addressing suffering. These are people who know a thing or two about hard times.

Now James has no interest in getting philosophical... "What is suffering really?" He doesn't say, "Well to help you think about suffering, let me tell you a story about a puppy who lost his way." No, James in his style throughout this book is very direct. He's only interested in how to live out the gospel practically IN REAL LIFE (IRL)- In our relationships, work, challenges we face, what we do with our money, how we speak- all subjects we will be addressing over these 5 weeks.

So right out the gate, while the ink is still warm, he flies through his greeting, and tell us that there is a way to face trials and come out the other side *better not bitter*. I don't know about you, but I want the former not the latter. Do doubt you've met bitter people? Do you ever wonder how they got that way? They've gone through their share of hard times and believed certain things, made particular decisions, thought about their situation a certain way that

gradually produced a bitter version of themselves. We've all met mature, wise, humble, joy filled people as well. Do you know that they got that way? They've gone through their share of hard times and believed certain things, made particular decisions, and thought about their situation a certain way that gradually produced a better version of themselves. In fact, you could have two siblings, who have the same terrible childhood, and go through many of the same life circumstances- one is bitter and one is better. All of us are going to face hard times. How do we not become cynical and hollow, but wiser and more joyful? James tells us **3 Keys to getting Better not Bitter through Hard Times.**

Key #1 Consider Trials as God's Training Program

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Notice here James doesn't say that your trials are joy. He's not a masochist. Yay! More Suffering, let's throw a party! No. He says CONSIDER it joy. He's not talking how we FEEL but rather how we THINK about hard times. There are two common pitfalls in how we think about hard times. A religious pitfall and a secular pitfall. Religious pitfall is that we think if we are a moral people or religious, especially a good, obedient Christian than we can avoid trials and suffering. It's like a deal we think we can cut with God- if I obey and have enough faith God will make my life easy and comfortable and I will avoid pain...and there are plenty of preachers out there who attract large crowds with this false theology. I heard one famous preacher say that he was declaring a season of ease, where burdens would just fall off your back. This isn't only false teaching, it can be destructive- It can cause a sincere but confused Christian to stumble when hard times come and it isn't a season of ease, and suddenly question whether they have enough faith and fall away. This isn't what James says at all. Trials are inevitable. Anything that can happen to anyone can happen to a Christian.

The Secular Pitfall is to live for happiness and avoid suffering. If I could summarize the mantra of modern America it would be: "Do whatever makes you happy." Everything in this culture reinforces the idea that unless you have all the things that make you happy, comfortable, safe here that joy is impossible, and you have nothing to live for, and leaves people completely ill-equipped to handle the inevitable hard times we are promised in this life.

But James gives us a better way- consider trials as God's training program. See the key to experiencing joy even in the trials of life is a correct understanding of what God is up to. He's at work in the trials of our lives to produce something precious in us...as the song goes- he never stops working. The precious thing he's working at in our lives is maturity and wholeness. [Verses on Slide] In other words to become a resilient disciple of Jesus which is what we are after here at Brandywine Valley Church. See the journey of resilient discipleship is faith training. Faith is like a muscle in the human body. As it is worked out it grows, but it needs something to push against. Physical training is a sweaty and painful process. If you are ever at the Y when I am in there, it's gross...I'm sweating, I'm grunting, grimacing, breathing heavy. But there is kind of joy in it, because I know that this training as hard and annoying as it can be, results in becoming a

healthier, stronger, more resilient version of myself. Trials are God's training program to develop certain precious qualities that only hard times can produce. What other way can we develop humility, patience, compassion and peace?

One of Michelangelo's most famous pieces of art is the **Statue of David**. Out of a single, enormous block of marble, and without any modern machinery, he chiseled out a 17ft, 13,000 lb statue of David. In an interview he was asked how he did this. He said, "Simple. I chipped away everything that didn't look like David." God, in his great love for us, is willing to use trials like a chisel to chip away everything that doesn't look like Jesus.

[Back to Verse] This doesn't just happen automatically- it's quite possible for hard times to make us bitter, self-consumed, desensitized, hardened, self-pitying and negative. This is why James says we must persevere by faith. That's the word- Hupermeno- to hyper stand your ground. When the hard times come, don't stop doing the things before the trials came. Keep praying, reading your Bible, going to church, staying in community with other people, singing worship songs. It's when you stop persevering that you stop the training program of growth.

Key #2 Seek and Trust God's Wisdom not your own.

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

"If any of you lacks wisdom..." which is like saying "If any of you lack oxygen..." which is especially true when we go through trials isn't it? It's normal in pain to feel a sense of disorientation, to feel like you don't know which way is up, to experience paralysis. Trials and confusion tend to go together. During these times it is essential to pray for wisdom. Really simple right? Then why is it sometimes prayer is the last thing we do when we've run out of options? It really ought to be the first. Sometimes I think it's because we think we must prove to God that we've got it all under control.

Have you ever had your boss assign you a project, and you really don't know what you are supposed to be doing, but you are too embarrassed to ask, you don't want to look foolish? I think this summed up my first year as your pastor. We sometimes do this with God. "Help!" is one of God's favorite words to hear. He already knows we don't know what we're doing! God is more willing to answer our prayers than we are to offer them. He will give you wisdom, it's a promise. And he's not tight fisted with it, it's a buffet! Not to a few Christians but to all. Not like flying, where the good stuff only goes to 1st class passengers...and their champagne flutes and all the way reclining seats...I'm not bitter. God gives freely and generously, the one who did not spare his only son for us, won't he give us wisdom in our time of need?

Ahhh...but here's the catch. There is a way in which we ask that is critical. *⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.*

⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. Well you say, "Well then I'm out of luck, because I have

doubts.” Are you saying we need blind faith like Indiana Jones in the Last Crusade when he stepped into what looked like thin air? No, look at the context. He’s talking about the kind of doubt that leads to doublemindedness. When we split loyalties and hedge our bets. “OK God I’ll ask for wisdom but in the meantime, I will see if a better option shows up.” It’s when we don’t believe that God’s ways are always the best. “God give me wisdom in my singleness.” But in the meantime you are dating people who don’t share your faith. “God, give me wisdom for how to get out of this debt.” But in the meantime you keep upgrading your wardrobe and putting it on your credit card. We can’t have one foot in God’s kingdom and one in the world. This mindset doesn’t receive from God, it can’t receive from God because God doesn’t play games. We have to be sincere, that whatever wisdom God gives us, often directly from His Word, or through a sermon or a friend, or just in the quietness of our prayer time, that we will move toward his wisdom not away from it with a singlemindedness. One of my favorite prayers in the whole Bible is the prayer of King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 when he was facing down a vast army that was far more powerful than the Israelite army. And he prayed, **“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”** That’s single-focused, prayer for wisdom. Our eyes aren’t shifting to the left or the right, to our own wisdom or the wisdom of the world. “Lord I don’t know what to do about my financial stress right now, but my eyes are on you.” “Father, I’m facing a family crisis and I don’t know what to do, but my eyes are on you.” “Lord, I have this diagnosis and I’m afraid and I don’t know what to do, but my eyes are on you.” These are the kinds of prayers God stands ready to answer. Is there wisdom you are asking for from God, but if you are honest, your doubleminded? Put your eyes on him alone- see what he says.

#3 Take the Long View of Eternity

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

We must view our short-term trials through the long view lens of eternity. There is a weird thing among Christians, and I think it’s somewhat unique to Christians. Many Christians feel some kind of guilt in thinking about eternal rewards. Like it’s a selfish thing for us to be motivated by them. OK- feel free to struggle with that, but can I free you from false guilt? Because the Bible is constantly motivating us to persevere in light of our eternal rewards. Jesus says in the gospels that anyone who has had to leave houses, possessions and families for the sake of the gospel will not lack these things hundred-fold in eternity. It’s not our only motivation, but it is indeed one of them, and an important one. When we are in the thick of the hard times we need to preach the gospel to ourselves, and an essential element of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the hope of eternal reward, the crown of life, with God forever and ever. So let that motivate you, it is meant to! OK, this break-up is painful, but life is short and eternity is long so I will persevere. Struggling in this job is hard but life is short and eternity is long, I can keep going. I’m worn out dealing with my mental health challenges or disability, but life is short and eternity is long, Lord help me to persevere. Think about it this way. If you are a Christian your trials are the closest to hell you will ever get, it only gets better from here, heaven awaits you. If you aren’t a Christian this is your heaven, and it’s the closest you will ever get to it.

I want to close by putting this altogether in real life through with a testimony of a Brandywine family that is literally in the thick of it right now, the Koban family- I asked Anita to share with me how the truth of James 1 actually works in real life for her and her husband Chip. Here's what she wrote. "Imagine walking through the darkest night with only a dim flashlight and a compass you secretly have no clue how to use. You think you know how to get to your destination, but somehow you keep making wrong turns... and then the batteries in your already dim flashlight die. This is how I feel most of the time. No one and nothing on Earth can prepare you for the news that your child will be born very sick. You can try to prepare, but I will tell you from experience it is impossible. At 20 weeks of pregnancy Chip and I were told our child would be born with a critical heart condition leaving him with half a heart. Our son, Aaron, was born at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's special deliver unit and at 46 hours old he had his first of three open heart surgeries. [Picture] To date he has endured more surgeries, procedures, tests, medications and exams than anyone I know. But, here's the thing... when Aaron, was born I did a lot of praying and one night I felt God speak to my very soul telling me to let go and give Him all that I was attempting to lift alone. I knew it was time to hand off my trials to Jesus if I was going to survive. My perspective shifted and instead of being too scared, too afraid, too stressed I became hopeful and felt an overwhelming peace. I was able to let go of the pain that came with not being able to fix Aaron's heart and instead focus on the gift of being a mom to my miracle and his three siblings. The more I began to share our story the more I was able to see God's hand over everything guiding the process I once felt so alone in. Building my faith resilience is a continuous process since every day it seems we are tested with a new challenge. I watched my son as he went into respiratory failure, I saw him struggle to walk after suffering a stroke during surgery, I watch my five-year-old daily take 15 medications and I'm able to feel the emotions of all that yet see the beauty in this messy life. It is because of this mess that Aaron has gotten to know Jesus. It's because of the scars (literal and mental) we are here today. Without trials and suffering we wouldn't know how deeply we need God in our lives."

Chip and Anita would be the first to tell you, they aren't heroes. And they aren't perfect, lots of up and down days holding on. We are all going to fail at times. They is only one person who faced the deepest and most profound hard times and never doubted, never failed even once. It is Jesus Christ. *Hebrews 12: fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

³ *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* Consider the one who persevered for you on the cross. Jesus decided to stay put, hyper stand his ground on the cross. He could have commanded the angels to take him down. But he didn't. His love for us what so strong that he was willing- the joy was laid before him which is having us forever and ever in eternity. See when we face hard times. We don't just grit our teeth and try harder- we look to Jesus who did it for us, who considered it pure joy to die for us.