

Profitable Problems James 1:1-12

A commentator tells this story about a lunch that he had that pertains to the Epistle of James. He once had lunch with an expert in the philosophical field of ethics. Once they were done eating, they talked for a little bit longer and then paid the check. Just before they left, his friend slipped the silverware into his briefcase. The waitstaff didn't see it, but Clinton did, and his face was in shock. The professor then told him, **"What, I only teach ethics."** There was certainly a disconnect between knowledge and action here, wasn't there?

As we begin our new series on James, we'll see that his audience has the same disconnect. **James the half-brother of Jesus writes about this very issue in the mid-40s to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the world. The Apostle writes his book to those who are lax in their faith and who are abusing the doctrine of justification. There is a disconnect between faith and action.** The author writes against the idea that since **I am justified by faith that I can do whatever I want. Some saw this as reason to do nothing in their faith life. Others saw it as a free-for-all for their sinful flesh.** Paul the Apostle is often confronted with the other side of this extreme: **I am saved by what I do.**

James writes to these Christians because he cares about them and their faith life. In his letter, he talks about faith. He shows how faith responds to God's forgiving love in Christ. He shows what faith looks like in action, and right away in his letter, he does just that. In the second verse, he shows how faith sees and deals with problems. He gets right to it!

The Apostle begins his letter with a shocking statement to get our attention. His brother Jesus would often do the same thing with His teaching. He said things like, **"Blessed are those who mourn," "The first will become last," "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off!"** This sort of technique isn't foreign to Scripture, and James uses it too. He says, **"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."** Really? Count my trials and problems as a joy? That's not something that I would like to hear in the middle of a problem. I'm sure you wouldn't want me to visit you in the hospital and say, "Isn't this a joy?" You might throw me out of the room and rightfully so. We don't think of problems as something to take joy in. But notice that James doesn't say that problems are not painless, pleasureless, or uncomfortable. He doesn't dismiss the fact or deny that trials can keep us up at night, twist and turn our stomachs, or cripple us with fear and anxiety. Often times, problems can do just that! In faith, he says, we see them differently. In faith, we can count them as a joy and as profitable. We'll come back to this point in a little bit because James first teaches us about problems.

James says that problems are inevitable. As humans, we wish that this was not the case. We wish that they can be avoided, skipped, or eliminated altogether. But James chooses his words carefully here. He writes, **"When you meet trials of various kinds".** He doesn't say **"if,"** as if they might be optional or could be flatly avoided. Problems aren't a **"maybe"** or **"might happen"** or **"perhaps."** James says the word, **"when."** Unfortunately, problems do come and they will come. They are unavoidable. They are going to happen. So the question becomes, **"When?"**

And that leads to the second thing that James teaches about problems. **He says that problems are unpredictable. We don't always know when they will come. He wrote, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."** The word for meet can also be translated, **"fall into unexpectedly"** and can refer to **"an unwelcomed encounter."** This word is the same word used in the parable of the Good Samaritan to describe how the man fell among thieves and was left for dead. ***"Meet" means "to fall into unexpectedly," and that is how problems come, isn't it?*** We don't always expect them nor do we always see them coming. They could happen later today. They can happen tomorrow. They could happen in weeks or months from now.

You can have that normal, everyday car trip that results in a **life changing accident.** You have that regularly scheduled check-up where the doctor says, **"these numbers don't look good."** You can get called into the boss' office and she tells you, **"Your office is being packed as we speak. We are letting you go."** It can be that phone call that delivers the terrible news of a death. You can face a betrayal from a person you never saw it coming from. **Problems are unpredictable. They can be unexpected.**

James also says that they come in many colors. When we remodeled my office several years ago I wanted to paint it blue, it is a color that apparently helps with stress and productivity. I thought that by choosing a simple color that the choice would be easy. How hard is it to pick a shade of blue? ***It is really hard.*** I was amazed by how many shades of blue there are at the paint store. It seemed to be over *a hundred!* Add in the

other brands, and that number increases. When you finally choose your shade, they can also make it lighter or darker, to make matters worse. And this is all just for the color blue! There are many colors! **For an indecisive person, the choice was nearly impossible!**

The Apostle describes problems as coming in many colors: **“when you meet trials of various kinds”**. The word for **“various kinds”** also means **“multicolored”** or **“many colored appearance.”** **It is the word that the Greek translation of the Old Testament uses to describe Joseph’s coat! And problems come in many colors and shades, don’t they?**

They can be **green**, money problems.

They can be **blue**, issues that create sadness or tears.

Problems can be orange, anger.

They can be **gray** for uncertainty.

They can be **black** for death and red for romance.

Problems are many and varied! They come in many colors and shades. They are multicolored. Problems are inevitable, unpredictable, and many colors.

Joni Eareckson Tada knows a lot about this. **She knows James 1:2.** As a kid, Joni enjoyed horseback riding, swimming, hiking, and tennis.

In 1967, she jumped into Chesapeake Bay, but tragically, misjudged the shallowness of the water and hit her head, severely injuring herself, becoming a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down.

Through hard work, she was able to **paint with her teeth**, and through voice recognition software, has written over **40 Christian books**.

In one book, she has this great quote about her wheelchair. She says, **“I hope I can take my wheelchair to heaven with me. I know that’s not biblically correct, but if I were able, I would have my wheelchair up in Heaven when God gives me my brand new body. Then I will turn to Jesus and say, ‘Jesus, the weaker I was in that wheelchair, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, Jesus, the stronger I discovered you to be. So, thank you, Jesus, for what you did in my life through that wheelchair, and now, Jesus,’ I will say with a grin on my face, ‘you can send that wheelchair to hell.’”** What a confession of faith.

Joni knew James 1:2, but she also knew James 1:3-4 as well.

James tells us that our problems have a purpose, that they can be profitable. The apostle says, **“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 is in times of trial and problems that we really learn patience and steadfastness. It is when we really seem to experience growth in our faith lives. With problems, we see our vulnerability. It is in our problems that we learn with Paul the Apostle Jesus’ words in 2 Corinthians 12: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Problems and trials help us to wrestle with God’s word and promises, promises like this: And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose....Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” Problems develop and produce steadfastness, and what is its effect?

James tells us. **“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life.”**

It is also in our problems that we are pointed to Jesus. He knows what it is like to live on this earth, and the problems that come with it. **Our Savior knows tears. He knows heartache. He knows grief. He knows disappointment. He knows pain. He knows suffering. He knows temptations. We are pointed to a Savior Who knows, sympathizes, comforts, and strengthens us through His Word and Sacraments.**

We are pointed to His cross and tomb where we see the good news for a broken and fallen creation facing trials, whether they be **physical, material, mentally, psychological, or social**. He gives forgiveness and life eternal, our greatest need. He will one day make all things well and new. Through faith, our Lord produces steadfastness through them. In these times, we see His grace, His strength, and His love. We see how He does these things so we may be mature and complete, bringing us to the goal of our faith, eternal life. Jesus will get you through this to life eternal.