

“Not Why But How”

James 1:1-18

Series: A Faith That Works Week 1. Trials and Temptations

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October 2, 2022

During a trip I led to the Holy Land, a few hearty souls wanted to walk through Hezekiah’s Tunnel in Jerusalem. King Hezekiah ruled in Jerusalem 2,700 years ago. The Bible tells us he ordered workers to dig a serpentine tunnel through solid rock. His goal? Create a secure source of water inside the walls in case an enemy attacks. More than two and half millennia later, it still flows with water and you can still walk through it.

Well, maybe *you* can. Not me. The tunnel is only one person wide. It’s a third of a mile long. It’s completely underground and completely in the dark. At some points the water rises up to your waist and the roof drops down below five feet. So even someone as small as me has to duck for quite a distance. First time I did this, in 1989, I got deep into the tunnel and made an important discovery: I’m claustrophobic. I felt trapped. I was suffocating. It seemed to go on forever. I thought I would never see the light of day again. Then someone said, “Hey, let’s blow out our candles and see what it’s like to be in total darkness.” I heard someone scream...and it was me.

Twenty-five years later you’d think I’d be over it. But when a few of our group said, “Hey Doug, will you take us through Hezekiah’s tunnel?” In my mind I said, “Nope. No way. Not going to happen.” I tossed and turned the night before. I pictured myself trapped in the tunnel. I woke up sweating, firmly resolved to not go. Then someone in the group said, “Oh, you’re going!” That was my wife. Another person said, “Don’t be a baby.” That was my daughter. Who says peer pressure only works on teens?

So I decide to do it. This is my trial, my test. Rationally I know I will get through it. I am certain there is enough air. I tell myself hundreds of tourists have done it. Yet all the reasoning in the world cannot stop the raw, irrational fear that grips my soul. This fear defines me, it limits me, it imprisons me. The only way to be free of it is to face it. I say a prayer, go to the head of the line and plunge into the water of Hezekiah’s Tunnel.

This trial of the tunnel teaches me that much of life is ruled by fear. What fear grips you? We fear hurricanes devastating our nation, wars around the globe, a falling stock market and a struggling economy, gun violence in our cities and schools, division in our nation and world. You worry about your classes, your job, your children, your parents, your spouse. You fear deadlines, debt, depression, divorce, disease, death. Some fears are silly and some serious. Some are reasonable and some irrational. Fear is a straightjacket. Fear holds you back from being free the way God intended you to be.

There are a number of ways to deal with fear. You can fight it - lash out at fear. You can fall to it - surrender to fear and allow it to rule you. You can fly from it - hide from fear, drown or drug your fear. You think, “Maybe I should just run away.” Unfortunately, the fear always finds you – because it’s in you. Fight, flight, fall ... those seem to be the only options. But there is another.

Seven centuries after Hezekiah dug his tunnel in Jerusalem, there is a man who lives in that city. He has every reason to be afraid. His name is Ya'acov bar Yosef. We know him as the Apostle James, the brother of Jesus and the author of a letter. After Jesus rose and appeared to James, he becomes the leader of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:12). It grows rapidly from 120 to eight thousand. It is also persecuted and scattered (Acts 8:1-3). Triumph and trial. Both cause fear and anxiety. James is the shepherd of Jewish Christians dispersed all over the Roman Empire. Facing the trials of persecution, they are tempted to fight, flight and fall down. But James recommends a fourth way: Faith.

The Letter of James coaches us on how to live by faith. For the next seven weeks we will let James be our coach and trainer. He will show us how to have a Faith that Works. Like all good coaches, James can be tough and unyielding. He will put us through a rigorous faith workout. If we stick with his program we will come out the other side spiritually stronger to face life's challenges. We'll find a faith that works. Right from the start James grabs our attention with a shocking statement.

When you face trials, James tells you to **Choose Joy Over Fear.**

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

At first glance, this is crazy. Joy in the face of trials? Who rejoices when they are in pain? I've made several visits to the dermatologist this year so she can burn off some warts on my hands. The doctor is a very kind Christian. She even apologizes for torturing me. I'm grateful for what she does but believe me I do not go in skipping and singing with joy. What does James mean? Look at the first word: consider. This is a point of view, an attitude. James does not try to explain why trials happen. He knows they do. He assumes they will come. For James, it is not "Why" but "How." You can spend a tremendous amount of time trying to find out "why" this pain has come. Often, there is no answer.

Like a practical minded coach, James focuses on "How." How do I get through this trial? His advice is to face it with joy. Now remember, joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness means you are glad for the trial. Joy means you know God can help. You draw on God's strength and peace to get through it. There are many kinds of trials: physical, emotional, spiritual. Each causes a special type of pain. James does not say pain is good, but it can bring good when we face it with God's help. Fear causes us to collapse under pressure. Joy takes pressure and turns it into perseverance.

James tells us that "perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4). When you face trials with God's help they strengthen you to handle more challenges. Muscles only become stronger when they are stretched and exercised. You have a greater ability to handle the challenges life throws your way when you face trails with faith in God.

Years ago I spoke at a funeral for a dear friend named Jay. He was the president of a company that built testing machines. His machines put metals and materials under stress to see if they can survive. Why do the machines push these materials to the breaking point? So we can trust them to hold up under pressure. Many people break, snap or collapse under stress. But some thrive in all circumstances. Some are peaceful under pressure. Some even shine with a joy that comes from above. My friend Jay was a follower of Jesus Christ. He possessed that God-given gift of joy. This man who built testing machines, moved through this life with a joy that never changed regardless of the tests life put him through.

Coach James goes on to tell us if we want to face trials with God's joy, we need to avoid wrong turns. As I walked through Hezekiah's Tunnel I noticed a few times the diggers hit a dead end, turned, and continued. Here are three dead ends which steal joy.

1. Doubt. James writes,

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. 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. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. James 1:6-8

When you face a trial, the first thing to do is turn to God and ask for His wisdom on how to handle it. You might pray, "God, thank you for being with me. Show me how to go through this, how you will use this trial to strengthen me, to deepen my faith, to help me grow." Faith does not mean you have all the answers. Faith means you trust in the one who is the Answer. Remember, during a trial the question is not "Why?" but "How?" "How will I get through this?" The Answer to "How" is "Who" – "Who can help me through this?" Jesus is the one. Jesus has already won the victory! Jesus opened the door to eternity for you. Jesus has overcome the world. Nothing in heaven or earth can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! You can trust Jesus.

It's okay to have questions. Having questions doesn't mean you doubt. According to James, real doubt means we don't trust Jesus to guide us. Doubt is an unstable place to be. We keep jumping back and forth – first trusting God and then trusting something else. It's like being tossed to and fro on the waves. It's like having one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat. It's like trying to walk two diverging roads at once. An ancient proverb says, "The one who tries to walk two roads will split his pants." Ask God for wisdom and then trust His direction.

2. Distractions. James continues:

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. James 1:9-11

James is not against wealth. He's against pride in our wealth and trust in our material possessions. We are frequently distracted by acquiring wealth and possessions. We think the goal of our life is to get things. Our identity is often defined by the car we drive, the house we own, the job we hold, the possessions we accumulate. James wakes us up to the obvious – all these will pass away like a beautiful flower in the scorching heat. Your life is worth so much more than things.

Every time people come back from mission trips they are amazed by the joy they witness in people who have very few things. "How can these people be so filled with joy when they don't have all the stuff we have?" Then we look at our neighbors and wonder, "Why are these people, who have everything, miserable?" Possessions can be good, they just aren't God. In fact God generously gives us what we need. James says,

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1:16-17

Don't let possessions distract you or steal your joy. God gives us gifts to bless others.

3. Desires. James finally adds,

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. James 1:13-15

Here is the real core of our fear. We think we fear something out there. The reality is we fear life will not go the way we want. We fear losing control over our circumstances. We are trying to run the show and it's not going well. What are all these based on? Our desires. Fear comes when we don't get what we want. If you have not figured this out yet, I want to let you in on a little secret: Life will not always go the way you want, you can't control your circumstances, and sooner or later the show will not go well. Now you can live under the control of that fear or you can trust in God. You can trust that God is running the show, that His will will be done, and that He is coming to lead you through the trial and, eventually, lead you home.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12

Do you want to know the most amazing thing about Hezekiah's tunnel? Somehow those primitive engineers and diggers, without any sophisticated tools, started at two opposite ends and met in the middle. We know this because an inscription was found inside the tunnel in ancient Hebrew which describes the exciting moment when the diggers met, broke through and watched the water gush from one end to the other. To this day, no one can explain how they did it.

I can't explain this, but I know that as you walk through the dark tunnel of your trial, God is coming to meet you. He is working to clear the way, to remove the obstacles and to lead you into the light, to lead you through your life, to lead you home. It may not be your way, it may not happen the way you want, it may mean you have to give up some of your distractions, desires and doubts. But you can count on this. He will come.

When I came out the other end of Hezekiah's Tunnel into the bright sunlight I knew, with God's help I conquered my fear. It felt like I was born again. It felt like a resurrection. I felt great joy.

You can count it all joy if you count on Him.