

Giving Thanks in 2020? **James 1:2-4**

What do you think when you look back at 2020? I must admit, I think I'd like it to be over and never come back again. I don't have a great attitude about this past year.

Thanksgiving is this week and usually there are times when we reflect on the past year and give thanks. We typically give thanks for the good things that have happened, the blessings God has given, the answers to prayer, the things that make us happy and feel good. So what do give thanks for this year?

We could probably find some blessings in the midst of the struggles we've been through and give thanks for them, but there's probably a higher percentage of struggles than normal that we have to work through. This has been a year where it's been easier to grumble and complain than to give thanks.

That's how I feel and I'm guessing many of you might feel the same way – isolation, quarantine, cancelled activities, loss of work, loss of opportunities, foiled plans, it's kind of a year of disappointment. A lot of people are complaining. Can we really be thankful? Can any of us say, "God, thank you for what I've been through this past year"?

I want to point us to some Scriptures this morning that I hope will redirect our thoughts and attitudes when it comes to going through difficulty and suffering. I think God wants us to see things a much different way, and because of what we've been through in 2020, we have the opportunity to see that more clearly.

I want us to look at a passage at the beginning of the book of James. James was a prominent leader in the early church in Jerusalem who saw the amazing growth of that church family, which was then followed by intense persecution that drove the Christians away from their homes to foreign places where they hoped to find safety. So it was written to people who had faced a lot of suffering to a higher degree than what most of us have been through in 2020. Writing to these Christians, this is how James begins his letter...

James 1:2-4

²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

So James is pointing them in a direction that I would say is probably the opposite of where they were going. My assumption is that the people in that situation, having been displaced by persecution, were facing major disappointments and doing a lot of grumbling and complaining. That's just what we do. If you were forced out of your home and had to relocate to a strange place, what would you be doing? I'd be struggling; I'd be disappointed; I'd complain. Life is tough. Circumstances are discouraging. Much has been given up and lost.

And knowing they were in those circumstances, James tells them to "Count it all joy when you go through what you're going through." Don't complain, despair, or grumble – count it all joy. I looked up the original words he used and it's pretty straightforward – he's saying what it sounds like he's saying. The NIV says, "Consider it pure joy..."

Let me ask you, as things have unfolded before you in 2020, have you considered it pure joy? I know I haven't. So this seems very counter-intuitive to me. In my way of thinking it should say something like, "Count it all joy when you reflect on all the ways God has blessed you and the goodness you've experienced in life." In my mind there's a correlation between blessings and joy, not between trials and joy. So how does James get to the place where he would say what he says?

"Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds..." and then he gives his reasons. What does he say? *"for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* So James sees something going on in the trials they were facing. They weren't just unfortunate events that they would have to try to trust God to get them through. They were purposeful circumstances that happened for a reason. There was something happening in the trials – God was doing something with them.

James tells them that the various trials they were going through were a testing of their faith. Not a testing to see if their faith would stand up or not, but a testing of refinement in order to purify and strengthen their faith – like gold being refined by fire. Peter writes about this at the beginning of his first letter. He writes in 1

Peter 1:6-7 *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

God uses various trials to test our faith, so that our faith becomes purer and stronger. So we are to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of our faith is strengthening our faith. James says this results in steadfastness – “the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” Steadfastness is endurance – not breaking, not giving up, not failing. Paul describes this kind of faith in 2 Cor. 4:8-9: *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”* It’s an unbreakable faith. No matter what life threw at Paul, his faith would not be broken.

Don’t you want that kind of faith? How do you get it? How does God produce that kind of faith in us? He does it through various trials and sufferings. God has a plan. God has a purpose. There is a reason for the sufferings we go through. God is producing in us a faith that is steadfast – or unbreakable.

James goes on to say in verse 4: *“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* So he is calling them to cooperate with the faith-strengthening work God was doing in them through their sufferings. The faith-strengthening benefits of suffering don’t happen overnight, they take time. They take longer periods of suffering or repeated sufferings. If steadfastness is going to have its full effect, we need to let it happen. We need to trust that God is doing a good work and not focus all our efforts on trying to escape any suffering we might be going through. As God is strengthening our faith and producing steadfastness over time and through the various trials we face, he will bring us to the place where we are “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” He will strengthen us through the suffering we face and use it to accomplish his good work in us.

Paul describes that good work a little more fully in Romans 5:3-5: *“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

Paul identifies character and hope as the virtues that God is producing in us through endurance in suffering – the character of Christ is what he has in mind, and the hope we have that God’s favor and love is upon us. It is through enduring suffering that God causes us to become more like Jesus and experience his overwhelming love in a personal way through the Holy Spirit. There is a depth of Christ’s love that we will never experience without going through suffering. Likewise, there is a depth of his character that we will never develop unless we endure through suffering.

Paul wrote about his desire to experience these things in his life in Philippians 3:8-10: *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”*

Paul wanted to know and become like Jesus so much that he willingly endured suffering to get there. That’s what God is doing in our lives when we go through trials and suffering, which is why James could say, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

That puts a little different spin on the sufferings we’ve gone through in 2020. And as I started seeing these things this week it brought me to a place of humility and repentance before God. I realized I needed God to bring about a change in my heart so I can let go of my desires for comfort and ease in this life for the sake of laying hold of the treasure of knowing and becoming like Christ. I want to be able to give thanks for what I’ve been through in 2020 and see my sufferings the way James did. I’m praying that God will do that in me.

What do you need God to do in you? Are you able to give thanks for even the difficulties of this past year, knowing that through them God is strengthening your faith? I encourage you to pray about these things this week and then take some time on Thursday, whether that be with your family or on your own, to give him thanks for what he’s done for you in 2020 – both the blessings and the sufferings – knowing that in all things he is working for your good.