

Smile When You Feel Like Screaming



James 1:1-8

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This month, my little boy, Finley, turns ten years old. A couple of weeks ago, I got to take him to the Smoky Mountains to hike Mount Le Conte. In the Cunningham house, ten years is a big deal. On my kid's ten year birthday, they get to pick an adventure, so Finley wanted to hike Mount Le Conte. We load up on a Thursday, and by Friday morning, we begin our hike up to Mount Le Conte, some six and a half miles, sixty-five hundred feet above sea level. It is a climb! We get there and my legs are throbbing, my feet are hurting, and my back is aching because I have a pack and water. We are going to spend all night at the top of Mount Le Conte. It was gorgeous! The trees were at peak, colors everywhere. It was an amazing trip. The next day, we began hiking down the mountain through six and a half miles. Every muscle that hurts when you climb, the opposite muscle hurts when you descend. My legs were burned and spent in a

whole different way. I'm going down this mountain, and by the time we get to the bottom, some four hours later, we're almost to the end. We can see the trail and see the cars, and I'm just thankful because every part of me aches. Fin is fine; I'm hurting. As we're almost to the end, we meet a couple. At this point, there are a lot of people. A lot of people start the trail, but very few actually finish the trail. This couple looks like a touristy couple, like they just came out of Gatlinburg after eating some chocolate. They don't have a water bottle, a pack, provisions, or hiking shoes. They are just walking on the trail and they bump into me and Finley, and they say, "Excuse me, are we almost to the top?" Finley looks at me, I look at him; we have our packs, water bottles, snacks, hiking shoes, hiking poles, and we are sweaty. They have Mickey Mouse ears...they have nothing to make this hike. I don't even know how to respond to their question. I could only say, "No. You are not even close to the top of the mountain. It is six and a half miles to the top." They just looked at me like a deer in headlights. We passed them and they kept walking. When we were just a few steps out, Finley says, "Hey Dad, I can tell you one thing; they're not going to make it to the top." I said, "I know!" See, what I found about Gatlinburg and the Smoky Mountains is that there are people who go to see the mountains, and there are other people who go to experience the mountains. If you're going to see the mountains, it can include a hotel, a hot tub, and some chocolate and you can just enjoy the view. If you are going to experience the mountains, you actually have to have burning calves and calloused feet, because it is going to be treacherous and hard. It's going to include sweat, danger, and toil, but the pain is worth it because you get a moment of that spectacular view.

For some of us, I think that's how we might have interpreted this thing called Christianity, or following Jesus. We interpret it as this easy path and it's always going to be nice. What James is going to do at the very beginning of his letter is to remind them that if they want to experience of who God is, they can't experience Him apart from the trials that come in their lives. We're going to see in chapter 1:1-8 that James wants believers to rejoice when they meet trials because trials are the thing that is going to make them whole and close to God. We're going to interpret that as this, which is the summary of the whole sermon: **Trials are not roadblocks**

to your happiness, but divine detours to your wholeness and closeness to God. We think trials and roadblocks are bad. They prevent me from being happy. They prevent me from getting what I want. We will see that trials are divine detours, and on the path of trials, in suffering, in pain, God is making you whole and close to Him. So what do we do when we get to a trial? We are going to rejoice. That's why I entitled the message, 'Smile when you feel like screaming.' When you just want to give up, when you just want to scream, when everything is so wrong, we are going to be the people who smile because we know what the trial is ultimately for. It is to make us whole and close to God. Let's begin reading in verse 1 of James 1.

Scripture

***"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:***

Greetings.

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. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

If we're going to study a letter, we have to back up just a little bit and think about who is writing this and who he is writing to. Luckily, in this letter we have both of those things. The author addresses himself, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." James is writing this letter. This is a little bit of a problem because James is a very common name, and he doesn't give a lot of detail about who he is, but virtually every scholar that I consulted this week agreed that James, here, is the brother of Jesus. James the half-brother of Jesus, related on his momma's side is the one writing this letter. We find a little bit about who James is in Galatians chapter 1. Paul goes and actually meets with James and calls him the brother of Jesus. In John chapter 7, we find that James was actually an unbeliever during Jesus life and ministry. It says Jesus brothers didn't even believe in Him. So James started as an unbeliever, but then something happens. In 1 Corinthians 15 after the resurrection, Paul says that Jesus appeared to James His brother. We know that upon this appearance, James becomes a follower of Jesus because if you read Acts, all of a sudden, James becomes a leader of the early Church. Just a little side note because many have pointed this out but I think it's a really good point, but a good evidence that Jesus really is God in the flesh, the Messiah, is because James, His own brother, becomes a believer and follows Him. Just think about how hard it would be to convince your siblings that you are God in the flesh that you would be the most likely person your sister or brother would think is the Messiah, God in the flesh. It would be really hard to convince your brother, and here James, a brother of Jesus, who would have had wrestling matches with Jesus growing up, who doesn't believe it when His reputation is going around and everybody is making a big deal of Jesus. He doesn't believe them, but upon the resurrection when he sees the risen Christ, he sees that this must be God in the flesh. This must be the Messiah, so he follows Jesus.

Notice in the letter, he doesn't name drop. He doesn't say this is James, Jesus' brother; you need to listen to me because I'm His brother. Instead, he says I'm a servant of Jesus. Think about that. He doesn't exalt himself; he humbles himself and says do you want to know my relationship with Jesus? I'm his servant. I follow Him. I worship Him. I proclaim Him. That is my credibility. James, the brother of Jesus is going to write this letter and

it's going to have all sorts of Jesus' teaching found in this letter. Who is he writing to? He is writing to a dispersed people. He says, "To the twelve tribes in the dispersion." That's who he's writing this letter to. Who exactly are these people in verse 1? Well, we don't really know for certain, but most would say that in Acts chapters 8 and 11 a persecution happens in Jerusalem. If you remember, there is a guy named Saul who becomes Paul, who is killing Christians, and they have to flee; they have to leave Jerusalem. They have to scatter all throughout the nations. They are persecuted, on the run, dispersed. So through persecution they have to be spread out, and now James, we think, is writing to this group of people, these Jews who now can't hang out in Jerusalem because of their faith in Jesus. In other words, following Jesus made their life worse. Think about that. He's writing to a people that when they become Christians life took a wrong turn. All of a sudden, they couldn't come home for Thanksgiving dinner because momma didn't want them at the table because they have forsaken the teachings and now following this radical guy, this Christianity thing. They're now dispersed. In his commentary, Kent Hughes says that these were seen as worse than slaves. They were despised by Jews and also despised by Gentiles. They were a people who were persecuted and impoverished.

They were people facing great trials, so it makes sense that right off the bat James says to count it all joy when you face trials because he knows this is a dispersed people, a persecuted people, and because of following Jesus, their life got worse. James says in verse 2, "Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds." We've just got to stop here. Just imagine reading this letter. "Hey, James has written to us! Let's all gather around and read it. He says to count it all joy. Oh, that sounds good, we get joy when we meet trials of various kinds...wait, what?" Did he say count it joy when you go on vacation? Did he say count it joy when everything turns out right? Did he say count it joy when you get the raise? Did he say count it all joy when you get a good diagnosis? No, he says count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds. Trials are the bad things in life, and James says count it all joy when you meet them. He's writing to a people who are going through some really hard things. Count it joy when it doesn't work out. Count it joy when you're down and out. If he

were writing to us, he would say count it joy when you go through 2020. Awe...2020 is a great year, because 2020 is filled with trials! So the best year of the world is probably 2020 because it's filled with trials. So when you go through it, count it joy. What would we say to him? Uh, no. This is not happy. This is not count it joy; this is when is 2021 coming. When can we get past this crazy year? James is saying don't miss this year. Don't waste this year, because this year is filled with trials and you should count it joy because you're going through a lot of trials. That doesn't even make sense to us. It didn't make sense to them either. They didn't read the letter any better than we're reading it now.

So what exactly are trials? This word is going to happen all throughout chapter 1. It will sometimes be interpreted as trials, and sometimes it will be interpreted as temptations. It can really go one of two ways. It can mean an outward trial or test, or, it can mean an inward temptation. In this first passage, he's using it to mean an outward circumstance, an outward pressing in on you, something that happens that you don't really control. It's not in you; it's out of you. Later, he's going to talk about temptations, those things that come from within you. So, which trials are we supposed to count as joy? The trials that we know the lessons and see them clearly, do we just count those trials as joy? No, James says to count them all, of various kinds. In other words, the small trial, like when you wake up and the toothpaste is out. What do you do? You smile. This is going to teach me patience. I've got to wait. Count it joy when the coffee is out. Those little small inconveniences that come at you, your day was going great, and this happens and now it's derailing a little bit, what do you do? You count it joy. You smile in those moments because God is chipping a little bit away of you to give you a little more of Jesus.

Then, there are those medium trials, like when you lock your keys in your car. That happened to me this week. An hour and a half later, I finally get in the truck. Ahhh...you just want to scream! But what should you do? You just smile and think God is teaching me. I've got to calm down. I'm going to get through this. He's doing something in me in this moment.

And then, there are those massive trials. What about when you get the news that you have cancer. What about when somebody betrays you.

What about when you lose a job. What about when you lose a loved one. What about when you go through a massive trial. James is going to say count it joy. Not be like happy with it, not be excited that it happened, but know here is a trial I'm going through, so in some way, you're going to be able to count it as joy, and we're going to see why that is. I love what David Platt says, "Trials are joy when God is our goal." When God is your goal, you will see the trial as good. The trial is not a roadblock to your happiness; it's a detour towards God. It's a detour to change you and make you more and more like Him.

So how do we count trials as joy? We're talking about the bad stuff. You have a great plan for tomorrow, and then somethings going to happen that is just going to get right in your way and mess it all up. What do you say in that moment? Is it a roadblock to your happiness, or, is it a detour towards your holiness? That's the decision you've got to make tomorrow, maybe this afternoon. How do we count it all joy? Look what it says in verse 3, "For you know." So, to count it joy, we're going to have to know something. What do we know? "That the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." So how do we rejoice in a trial? We have to know something. We have to know that a trial is a faith tester. So when a trial comes, it's not just a trial; it's a faith tester. What do faith testers do? Faith testers produce steadfastness. If you're going to rejoice in a trial, you're have to long more for steadfastness than for comfort. You have to long more for fruit in your life than just loot of all the stuff in your life. You have to see that through this trial God is going to do something in me and through me, so I'm looking for what God is going to produce in me because of this trial.

That word, test, the specific word James uses, is only used one other time in the New Testament. It is in 1 Peter 1:6. Peter almost says the exact same thing that James says in this text, but we get a little deeper inside that word. It says, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials." So trials are bad; they're the stuff that grieves you. Verse 7 says, "so that the tested genuineness of your faith." That is that same word. It's a test that's determining how genuine, how strong, how real is your faith. It's that fire,

that squeezing. He says it is, "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." This is a faith that is being tested. It's refined by fire to see how is your faith, and through this testing, it's going to produce something in your life, and that is steadfastness. You're not going to know your faith unless it's tested. I remember when I was a middle schooler, we had to build these little model bridges. We built them out of wood and had to follow these instructions. We had to design them a certain way to withstand pressure. I came to class that morning knowing that I had the strongest bridge, because I could just look at it. It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was better than any other bridge I saw. It was going to withstand the most pressure. I felt that until my teacher put it in the vise and put pressure on it. Within seconds, it snapped like a twig. I was in the bottom of the class. See, my bridge looked so good, but when testing came, when pressure came, it wasn't nearly as good as I thought it was. It snapped. That's what trials do. Some of us interpret, like I'm doing great. Everything is good. I'm so close to the Lord. I'm following Him, and then a test comes that reveals something. It reveals that maybe your faith is not as strong as you thought it was. This testing is good for us to know and see how our faith is.

See, a trial does a couple of things. It can either reveal a lack of faith, or it can refine your current faith. In a trial, it can reveal I didn't have faith because I completely turned, I completely sought everything on my own, and I failed that. So what do you do? You turn to the Lord in faith. Or, if you pass a test, if you get through it, what does it reveal? I kept my faith in the Lord and He saw me through; therefore, I have more faith now to go through it the second time. See, the trials test our faith, and our faith is made stronger through the test. I love what Piper says on this text, "Faith is like muscle tissue. If you stress it to the limit, it gets stronger, not weaker." That's good! When you stretch it, when you put pressure on it, it doesn't get weaker; it actually gets stronger. That's what true faith does in the midst of trials. It doesn't get weaker; it only gets stronger. You have to look at your tests that way.

See, there's a tension that we all feel. We tend to want a good life. That's what we all want. We want the good life. God, give me the good life. The tension is that God actually wants to make you good, and sometimes those two things are different directions. You want the good life, and God wants to make you good. He wants to make you holy. He wants to make you compete. He wants to make you lacking in nothing. Sometimes, that doesn't come through the good life. It comes through a lot of pain and a lot of trial. See, trials are interruptions to our plans, but trials grow your person. They derail us, they derail our plans, but they are God's way to make us more like Jesus. So, we rejoice when the trials come because they're testing our faith; they're strengthening our faith. Notice, the test doesn't make us stronger. It's not like when you go through test you're just going to get thick skin. No, the test makes your faith stronger. Your faith in the Lord Jesus, the death, burial, and resurrection actually imputed in your life makes a difference and gets you through everything you need to go through. It's a strengthening of your faith.

Verse 4 says, "And let steadfastness." So, the tests are producing steadfastness. When your faith is tested, when that muscle is flexed, over time it produces steadfastness. What about steadfastness? "And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and compete, lacking in nothing." Man! That sounds good, doesn't it? Just look again at those words, 'that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' When steadfastness is mature, when it grows, when that muscle of faith is flexed and flexed, what happens? You become perfect and whole, lacking in nothing. You're the sheep that says 'the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.' There is nothing that I need because I have my Shepherd. That's the place you get to. How many of us want to get there? How many of us want to be able to say I am perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, that's who I am. If you want that, how do you get there? If you want that to be true of your life, how do you get that? You follow the verses backward. If this is the end I want, perfect, complete, lacking in nothing, this idea of wholeness before the Lord, it comes through steadfastness. How do I get steadfastness? It comes through testing. How do I get tested? It comes through trials. If I want to be complete, perfect, and lacking in nothing, the only way to get it is through trials, hard times, the things that come you

don't like and don't want. Those are the things that make you perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing.

So, how can James say to them I know life has gotten really bad? You're disowned by your family. You're in poverty. Some of you can't get a job. Some of you are starving to death. How can these things be good? It is because through them you are being made perfect, holy, and complete before the Lord. You're getting to the spot where you lack nothing, so when you get in those moments, count it joy, not be happy with what is happening, but count it joy because you know where all of this is going. You know it is making you into the person God wants you to be.

Just imagine for a moment that you're standing before two doors. You open the first door and there is music, there is a straight and wide path lined with cotton candy and ice cream. People are singing and dancing, and it's like everything you've ever wanted, a dream girl, dream guy, a perfect career, perfect kids, the car you want; everything is just the way you would want your life to go. You're looking at it and you're filled with happiness because this is everything you've ever wanted! As you look, at the end of the road you can see your future self. All of a sudden, you're taken to the place where you can see your future self up close. As you look at your future self, you see someone who is irritable, conceited, indulgent, impatient, immoral, impure, vile, mean spirited, greedy, and just selfish. As you see that person, you can see they are lacking everything. They just not satisfied at all. Though they had everything they ever wanted, they're not satisfied at all. Then the door closes and you open the other door. Through the second door, you can't even see the path because it is so winding. There are thorns, hills, climbs, swims, sand, deserts, and treachery around every corner. It looks scary and dark. You don't want to go down this path because it just looks like everything on it is going to hurt. But then, you see your future self at the very end. You see a person who is absolutely radiant, full of generosity, goodness, meekness, kindness, faithfulness, loving, and patient. You see a person who is so filled with the glow and radiance of the Spirit that you can hardly look at your future self. Then you are taken back to stand in front of the two doors. If you had to pick, which door would you walk through? Would you pick the good life that ends with

a not so good you, or, a life that has some trials, hard times, and hardships but ends with a person who is perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing?

What James is trying to say is you have to have the right perspective of the trials you're facing. They're not just trials for the sake of trials; they're actually doing something in you to make you the type of person God wants you to be. He's saying don't just look at the trial; look at your future self. If you want that version of you, as radiant and glowing in the holiness of God, looks a lot like Jesus, it happens through trials. What is he trying to say? Don't scream through the trial. Don't try to alleviate the trial. Don't try to just fix the circumstances around the trial. Look at what needs fixing inside of you in the trial so that you don't waste it, but that you count it joy. You embrace it, and say, ok God, this is not good; I don't want this, but what do You want to do with me through this? That's how God wants you to see and view trials because He wants you to be perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing.

So, what do you do when you're actually in them if we're going to have a right perspective? Ok, so the trial isn't a roadblock to my happiness, it is a detour towards wholeness, and closeness to God, so I have to see them differently. I've got to know the trial produces something in me. It's making me more like Jesus, so I'm going to count it joy. So what do you do when you're in the trial? You have to trust and you have to pray. Look at verse 5. We're going to see a tie in to verses 4-5 with a connecting word. "If any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him." Notice the connecting word, lacking. In verse 4, we're lacking in nothing, and in verse 5, if you are lacking something, you ask God. In other words, in the midst of a trial when you realize you're not completely lacking nothing because you're really hurting and don't know what to do, you ask God. What does God do? He gives generously to those who ask, without reproach. He's not mocking you. He's not laughing at you. He's not reviling you for asking. He is a loving Father who gives you what you need. What do you need in a trial? You need wisdom, because a trial reveals you don't know everything. Before the trial, I know it all. In the trial, I don't know anything. This has thrown you for a loop and you don't know how to get through it, so what

do you do? You ask God for wisdom to know what to do, to how to make the next step. What does God do to those who ask? He gives generously. He is a loving Father who is giving out wisdom to His kids. He's not withholding it.

So, during the trial, you have to go and ask, but there is a way you have to ask. You have to ask in faith. Verse 6 says, "But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind." We ask in faith. The trial is a faith tester. What is faith? It is believing Jesus. I'm putting my faith in Christ that He will get me through. How do we ask? We ask a real God, really believing He will give us what we ask for. See, doubting is like a backup prayer. It's like I'm going to handle this; God, if you can help, great, but I'm going to handle this on my own. That's a doubting prayer. We don't really believe that God is the one who will get us through this, so we rely on self rather than our Savior. We need to rely on our Savior if we're going to grow through this trial.

So what is the person who doesn't have faith? It says he's like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. I love to boogie board when we go to Florida. It's one of my favorite things. The boys and I get out there and try to chase down waves. Have you ever tried to chase down a wave? It's really hard. Waves are unpredictable. They have no rhyme or reason. They come and they go. They blow and have no foundation. They're not consistent; wherever the wind blows is where the wave is going to go. That is the picture here. James says a doubting person is like a wave that just doesn't know where it's going. It's here and it's there. That's what a doubting person is. You're not secure. You don't have a foundation. You don't know where you're doing. You're just blown by whatever happens in life. James says don't be a wave that's tossed to and fro. Don't be a doubting person. Have faith in God. Ask in faith so that He can give you what you need to get your through the trial, and in the trial make you more like Him.

What is the doubting person? Verse 7 says, "For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a doubleminded man." It actually says double souled. He has two souls, double souled,

double heart, and double mind. He's trusting in God and himself. In Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, it's Mr. Look Both Ways. You look at God and you look at self all the time, and if you do that, you're really just looking at yourself. What does James say you can expect? He says in that, you are "unstable in all your ways." Notice the difference. In the test, if you turn to God in flexing your faith muscle, what does it produce? Steadfastness. In a test, if you doubt and run to yourself, what do you end up being? Unstable. Do you want to be steadfast, or do you want to be unstable? If you want to be unstable, trust in you. If you want to be steadfast, trust in the Lord. As steadfastness moves, grows, and flexes, it makes you whole and close to the Lord, because the test is drawing you near to God.

James is trying to get us to see the beauty of our trials. That seems so hard for us because trials aren't beautiful. Trials are messy. Trials hurt. Trials aren't something we want. But as believers, we have to see that trials lead to steadfastness rather than being unstable. We're not tossed by the wind, but we are loving Jesus and holding fast to Him. James' message is rejoice when you face a trial. Smile when you want to scream. Why is that? It is because trials ruin your plans, but that's good. When your plans are ruined, you can actually find the plans of God. Trials are what tear down your kingdom so that you can begin building the Kingdom of God. Trials are those things that bump into your idols so that you can see only God is going to satisfy. Trials are those things that kill little parts of yourself, so you can have more and more of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we want that door where we see we are perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing, it takes trials. So, we don't seek them out, but when we meet them, we see them clearly. They're not roadblocks to our happiness to be avoided, to pout and scream about, but they are God's divine detours to make us complete, perfect, and lacking in nothing.

On the way home, me and Finn laughed quite a bit about that couple we passed. Finn would keep asking, "I wonder how far they got. I bet they only made it ten more feet. I bet they only made it a hundred more feet." We kept laughing about these people who were on the trail to Mount Le Conte, but clearly only belonged in Gatlinburg. They were not ready for the mountain, and somehow, they missed the memo that a mountaintop

experience requires pain, danger, sore feet, and burning calves. They thought experiencing the mountain was easy, and indeed, it is actually hard. Some of us have missed the memo of following Jesus. We believe following Jesus is just easy and it's always easy. So, when we get opposition, this must be a problem with the plan. What we need to see is if you want to experience God and become perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, pain is actually part of the plan. You will have sore feet. You will have burning calves. The truth is you can't experience a mountaintop without pain. You can't have wholeness and closeness to God apart from trials. So we rejoice in the trials, trusting in God. God is going to get you through it. In the trial, we pray for wisdom that He will show you exactly what you need. And we know that through this trial, God is making me whole, and He's bringing me closer to Him. Tomorrow's trial is not a roadblock to your happiness; it is a divine detour to make you more like Christ. When you face the trial, whether it's toothpaste or something much bigger, rejoice. God is doing something in you all along the way.