

# JAMES: IT'S ALL GOOD!

## James 1:1-4

*Even our trials can lead us to joy.*

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One of the people that kept me between the ditches in my early years was my mother. Her name was Johnnye, and she was a sweet, gracious, southern lady, but she could also be a force of nature when the situation demanded it. She was a very “hands-on” parent, and sometimes that hand was the hand of discipline. As my brother and I grew up and became more independent, my mother would always want to make sure that we remembered all that we had been taught. As we were leaving the house, she would follow us to the door and say, “Let me caution you one more time...” Then she would remind us how to act. That cautionary refrain was so predictable that it became a running joke in our family. But it must have worked. My brother and I both turned out OK.

I’m sure I am not the only person who was saved from the ditch of destruction by the love, care, instruction, and discipline of our mothers.

The world we live in today is more complicated than it used to be. So motherhood (or parenting, to include the dads) is more complicated, too. I read an interview this week with three mothers about what they would like their pastors to say on Mothers’ Day.<sup>1</sup> The plea from these mothers was to be real about motherhood. Americans invented Mothers’ Day (Actually a Methodist woman invented it to honor her mother.), and we tend to idealize our mothers, at least on this holiday. We have a vision of the perfect mother, surrounded by obedient children, in a clean house, with dinner on the table, adored by an admiring husband. Who actually lives in that reality?

We use to sing “Happy the Home When God Is There” every Mothers’ Day, but today is the first time in the last nine years we have sung it. It’s not a bad hymn, but I usually avoid it because I don’t want to give anybody the idea that if the home is not happy, God is not there. God is especially there when we struggle, and families going through turmoil need the assurance of God’s presence and help. We used to give flowers to the award-winning mothers—oldest, youngest, most children, etc. This exercise in competitive maternity ended because the awards started highlighting some awkward family situations, and the mothers didn’t want to be singled out. It was a nice sentiment that just didn’t work anymore.

The word that the mothers in the interview used was “tricky.” Motherhood is tricky. We want to celebrate our mothers and lift up the values of good parenting. But we don’t want to exclude the women who don’t fit the idealized version of motherhood: those who have no children, those who gave their child up for adoption, those who had an abortion, those who struggle with infertility.

Mothers today are great examples of keeping it between the ditches. On the one side is the ditch of exhaustion and depression and despair if you don’t take care of yourself. On the other side is the ditch of taking care of your kids and trying to keep them out of their own pitfalls growing up. But in the middle, there is joy, love, and hope.

The Letter of James is a great Scripture text for finding joy in the midst of the struggle. The apostle James, traditionally thought to be the brother of Jesus, endured multiple trials in his life and faced them all with faith. He was not one of the original twelve, but he rose to leadership quickly in the early church. He became an apostle because Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection.<sup>2</sup> James presided over the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and made the decision about how Gentiles would be allowed into Christian fellowship.

The Bible doesn’t tell us about the rest of James’ life. According to the early church historian Eusebius, he was condemned to die by the Jewish Sanhedrin in 62 C. E. He was taken to the pinnacle of the Temple, just as Satan took his brother there. But James was cast off the pinnacle and plunged to the pavement below, about 164 feet, or 15 stories. No angel broke his fall. Miraculously, James survived the landing and was praying for the forgiveness of his executioners, until they stoned him to death.<sup>3</sup>

James knew the ditches. Yet he opened his letter to the early church, probably written about the same time as the letters of Paul, with a word of joy: *“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”*<sup>4</sup>

How did he do that? How can we do that? How can we have joy in our trials? How can we develop the endurance we need for the long race of life? How can we become mature and complete Christians? As we close this series on staying between the ditches, let’s remember three things.

**At the bottom of the ditch or the top of the hill, God is with us.** With all the Bible heroes we have discussed in this series, one thing has held true. They never lost their faith in God. There was always a relationship—good times and bad, mountaintop and valley—God was there.

Some of the most beautiful expressions of God’s presence come from the psalms of King David. He was a man after God’s own heart, the Scripture says.<sup>5</sup> He was a gifted musician, a powerful warrior, the most successful king ever in the history of the Jews. But he also knew the depths of despair. He was hunted by his enemies. He was an adulterer and a murderer. He suffered the death of a child multiple times.

Yet when David was in the ditch, he turned to God. Psalm 56 says, *“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.”*<sup>6</sup> And the familiar words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm remind us, *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”*<sup>7</sup> At the bottom of the ditch or the top of the hill, God is with us.

The late Sparky Anderson is the only manager in the history of baseball to coach teams to the World Series in both the National and American Leagues—Cincinnati’s Big Red

machine in 1975 and '76, and the Detroit Tigers in 1984. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2000.

But even this Hall of Fame manager had a bad season or two. In 1989, Detroit finished with 59 wins and 103 losses—a miserable record, the first season in two decades Sparky had ever fallen below .500. He was so ashamed and embarrassed and upset he left the team for 17 days. Looking back on it, this Methodist-turned-Catholic said, “If you think you’re destined never to fail, you better keep one eye open when you fall asleep at night... For my first nineteen years as a manager I was blessed by so much good fortune I thought maybe the devil had forgotten where I lived. In 1989, I found out that Sparky Anderson has to pay his dues, too... I never got over the point of bleeding a little bit after every loss, but I finally learned to let go. I can’t say I’m happy with the pain I went through in 1989. But I’m grateful for what it taught me.”<sup>8</sup>

Sparky learned the second thing James has to teach us. **God can work through our trials to make a difference.** And that brings us joy.

Suffering can destroy our faith, or it can be a great incubator of faith. Trials can be a catalyst for a deeper relationship with God. The tough times can make us stronger Christians. I had someone share with me that he was enjoying this series on staying between the ditches. Then he said, “It has been in the ditches that I have learned all my lessons of faith.” God works through our trials to make a difference, and that’s good.

The verse we have quoted several times in this series is Romans 8:28: “*We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him.*” I wish everyone would commit that verse to memory. Life is not really all good, but God can make it all serve a useful purpose in our lives. I love the statement E. Stanley Jones made on several occasions, that Jesus didn’t simply bear the cross; he *used* the cross.<sup>9</sup> The worst suffering in the world became the greatest source of life for planet earth. God used even the death of his Son to make a difference.

God can use our times of trouble to make a difference not only in our own faith, but in the lives of others. When we have suffered, it can open up an avenue of compassion for others who are suffering in the same way. Or just knowing how God has been gracious to us, we can be gracious to others. Our ditches become resources for service and ministry in the world. Between the ditches, we can help others who are struggling.

Adam Hamilton told a story in one of his books about a ministry at Church of the Resurrection. At Christmas time, they take baskets of food and supplies to any of their church members who are unemployed. Adam called a woman named Carrie and told her who he was and that he wanted to stop by with a Christmas basket. Carrie immediately began to cry on the phone. When Adam got her calmed down, she said she would be glad for him to stop by.

When Adam delivered the basket, Carrie explained why she had burst into tears. With all the problems in her life, she had been so depressed that she couldn’t go to church that morning. She watched the service online, then she felt moved to write a prayer that went like this: “...I am not blaming God, but I am asking, Where are you? I need you! I need help! And no matter how hard I try, I am not getting better. I say your will be done, but it is so hard. I’m not Jesus. I am so weak. I need a break. I need love. I need you, Lord. Please, wrap your arms around me and give me your peace. Give me your strength, give me your hope. Let me want to believe and not fear.”

No sooner had Carrie finished writing that prayer than the phone rang, and it was Adam Hamilton, the senior minister of her church, saying he wanted to bring her a sign that God loved her and had not forgotten her. She had never had a prayer answered so quickly!

Adam Hamilton wrote, "I did not know I was answering her prayer. I was just dropping off a Christmas basket. But God had something more in mind." Then he said, "As I was leaving her home, I sensed her joy, but I experienced incredible joy myself."<sup>10</sup> God didn't solve all of Carrie's problems that day. But God gave her a sign, though the ministry of another person, that he was with her. God works through our trials and in our trials to make a difference.

**Finally, we can have joy in our trials today because we know that in the end, God wins.** History is on a path to the Kingdom of God, and God will not stop until all things are put in submission to the Reign of God. One day, all sadness and sighing, all sickness and crying, every trouble and every tear, even death itself, will be wiped away by the loving hand of God.

Scripture is full of those images. The final picture in the last book of the Bible shows a new heaven and a new earth coming down out of heaven. A voice from the throne of God says, "*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*" And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."<sup>11</sup>

In the end, God wins. Love wins. Hope wins. Life wins. Remember the Frederick Buechner quote from two weeks ago: "The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best."<sup>12</sup> They killed our Jesus; that was the worst thing. But he rose again, and that's the best. The world can do its worst to us, but we will not go under. We will rise again. We are the people of hope. We are the people of joy—whatever happens.

The late author Dallas Willard told about a worship service he attended in South Africa in a neighborhood that had been afflicted by tragedy. A tornado had recently torn through the town, ripping apart 50 homes and killing five people. The night before, a teenager in the church had been killed in gang violence. Immediately before the service, a house across the street had burned to the ground. They were in all kinds of ditches!

The pastor began his opening prayer: "Lord, you are the Creator and the Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our own children, when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we are in the midst of death."

As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then, once he finished his prayer, very slowly, the whole congregation began to sing, at first very quietly, then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song not of lament, but of praise—praise to a God who in Jesus had plunged into the very worst to give us the very best—a promise of an ending beyond all imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of the end.

Dallas Willard said, "Christian hope isn't about looking around at the state of things now and trying to imagine where it's all going. It's not about trying to calculate the future from the present. It's about breathing now the fresh air of the ending, tasting the spices and sipping the wine of the feast to come."<sup>13</sup>

Today we know some things. We know that we love our mothers or their memory, and we appreciate them for keeping us out of the ditches, to the extent that they could. We know that God is with us, wherever we might find ourselves today physically, emotionally, or spiritually. We know that even in our struggles, God is at work to make a difference for good. And we know that there's a feast day coming. This is the assurance of hope, that the worst thing is never the last thing, and we can consider it nothing but joy! With this knowledge, with this faith, we can stay between the ditches.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Woodley, "What I Wish My Pastor Would Say About Mothers," Preaching Today, May 6, 2024. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2014/may/what-i-wish-my-pastor-would-say-about-mothers.html>.

<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 15:7

<sup>3</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *Interpretation: First and Second Peter, James and Jude* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 84.

<sup>4</sup> James 1:2-4.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 13:22.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 56:3.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 23:4.

<sup>8</sup> Sparky Anderson and Dan Ewald, *They Call Me Sparky* (Sleeping Bear Press, 1998), pp. 194ff.

<sup>9</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *Living Upon The Way: Selected Sermons of E. Stanley Jones*, Anne Mathews-Younes, ed. (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 2008), 55. <https://www.estanleyjonesfoundation.com/about-esj/theology/>.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 83ff.

<sup>11</sup> Revelation 21:3-5.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982).

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/416962-the-worst-isn-t-the-last-thing-about-the-world-it-s>.

<sup>13</sup> Dallas Willard, editor, *A Place for Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).