

September 5-9, 2022 Edition

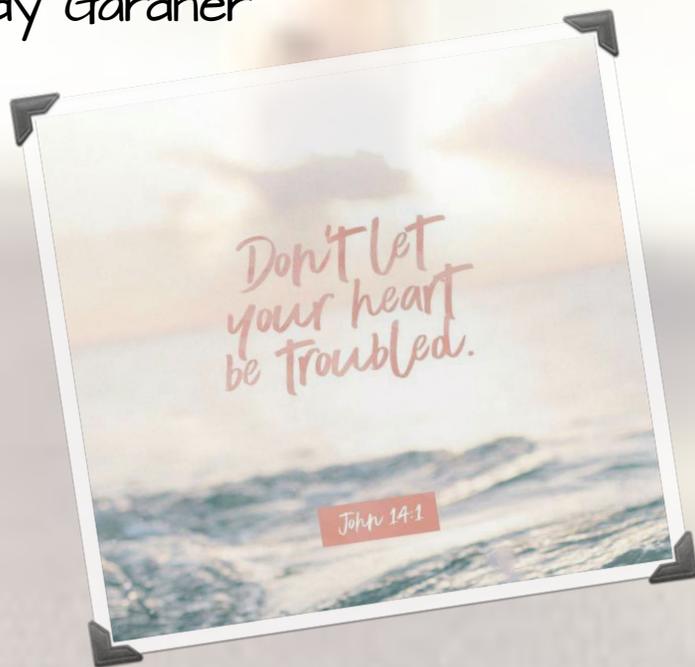
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The Year Of Jesus Part 36

James On Wisdom & Trouble

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September 3/4, 2022



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the "twelve tribes"-Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings! James !:1 (NLT)

Reflection: Today we begin a brand new lesson series that we will be in for about 26 weeks looking verse by verse at the only book of the New Testament that is considered to be "wisdom literature". Wisdom literature is a category or style of writing that is basically a practical explanation of the doctrines of God. In the Old Testament books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are considered wisdom literature. In the New Testament only the book of James belongs to this genre. The book of James is believed to be the first book of the New Testament to be written. It is a practical description of what a life of following Jesus should look like. It's obvious that it was written by a man named James but there are several "James'" mentioned in the New Testament- which one wrote this book?

Well, the apostle James who was the brother of the apostle John was killed by king Herod in Acts chapter 12 so it couldn't be him. There is another apostle named James (the son of Alphaeus) but most scholars agree that it wasn't this James that writes this letter. There's a third James found in the pages of the Bible. The first time we read about him is in Matthew 13:55:

Then they scoffed, "He's just the carpenter's son, and we know Mary, his mother, and his brothers-James, Joseph,[ā] Simon, and Judas.

Here we learn that one of Jesus' brothers was named James. We also learn something pretty interesting in John 7:3-5:

So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For not even his brothers believed in him.

So we know that one of Jesus' brothers was named James and that Jesus' brothers didn't believe that Jesus was Who He claimed to be. Then we are told by the apostle Paul that after Jesus' resurrection He made several appearances to different people/groups:

He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him. 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 (NLT)

So after His resurrection Jesus appeared to quite a few people and groups... one of which was His brother James... you remember him, right? The guy who didn't believe that his big brother was actually The Son of God? I wonder what that little reunion was like for James... awkward! Good thing big brother Jesus is the King of Forgiveness... but what I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall for that little family reunion.

James doesn't let guilt and shame paralyze him though. In fact, James becomes the leader (sort of like the lead pastor) of the Jerusalem church. The very first church in the history of mankind. The most influential church during most of the first century (especially the early years of the church from AD 33 1/2 to AD 70 after which the city of Jerusalem was destroyed

by Rome). James was the leader. James was a mover and shaker. James took following Jesus to a whole new level.

Jesus' church started off as a Jewish sect of Judaism. Gentiles were allowed to join Jesus' church but they were expected to follow Jewish customs and the Old Testament Law. The apostle Paul was the first one to seriously and successfully take the gospel of Jesus into the gentile world. As He did Jesus made it known that the gentiles were not required to follow the Jewish Law in order to become/stay a follower of Jesus. As Paul started teaching this to the converts to Jesus throughout the Roman empire it caused some ruffled feathers back at home- in Jerusalem (the birthplace of Christianity). Many Jews believed that in order for a gentile to be saved they needed faith in Jesus plus obedience to the Jewish Law. It became such a kerfuffle (yes... I used the word "kerfuffle" ;o) that in AD 50 there was a special meeting in Jerusalem with the leaders of the church to settle this question once and for all.

You can read all about it in Acts chapter 15. The apostle Paul and his coworker Barnabas were there along with the apostle Peter, the apostle John and James- the leader of the Jerusalem church and the brother of Jesus. James chaired the meeting which says something to me about what kind of leader he had become. I mean, think about it- there's a meeting that included St. Paul, St. Peter & St. John (arguably three of the most influential Christian lives ever lived) and none of them were in charge of this meeting. James must have been a pretty amazing guy.

How do I know that the James of Acts chapter 15 is Jesus' brother? Look at what Paul says in Galatians 1 when he tells the story of his first trip to Jerusalem after his conversion:

I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. Galatians 1:19 (NIV)

Is it possible that James of Jerusalem wasn't Jesus' brother? Possible but doubtful. It seems pretty obvious that Jesus' brother was the leader of the Jerusalem church and the writer of this letter to a suffering church around the world. A church that had been plunged into trouble and persecution. James writes to Christians everywhere to explain to them how to live a life following Jesus during times of intense trials and troubles.

More tomorrow about James and his credibility when it comes to living the life Jesus calls us to.

Tuesday:

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. Whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. James 1:2-4 (NLT)

Reflection: Have you ever read something in the Bible and thought, "now how am I supposed to do that with what's going on in my life? Obviously the writer didn't anticipate what I'm going through when he wrote that!"? That's probably never true... but with James it's actually a pretty comical thought (even if it is a completely natural one).

James was the pastor of the Jerusalem church during a time of really intense suffering there. There was a famine that caused such poverty that the apostle Paul created a Go-Fund-Me for the Christian's living in Jerusalem (ok- the famine predated GoFundMe by a couple thousand years but that's basically what Paul did reaching out to other churches urging them to share with the Jerusalem Christians to help ease their burden/suffering). There was also an intense persecution of Christians that broke out during this time by the Jews of Jerusalem. People were losing their jobs, their financial future, their homes, their families and in some cases even their lives. In fact, James was killed by people who wanted him to reject Jesus and tell his congregation to abandon the faith. When he refused he was tossed off the top of the Temple. Not quite dead yet he somehow got to his knees and started praying for forgiveness for those who were killing him. Enraged they finished the job with stones and clubs. Now let's read the first part of the book of James again:

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. James 1:2-4 (NLT)

Does that change the way you see this passage. When James tells you and me how to react when "trouble" comes our way he isn't asking us to do something he didn't do. He's asking us to do something that he had committed his life to. Something he had learned by watching his brother. Handling trouble and pain with grace and mercy and courage and faith. James had nurtured the art of developing soft callouses. If you remember the devotionals from two weeks ago we talked about the 5 habits of highly effective follower of Jesus. These were the 5 shared characteristics of men and women who were identified as powerful people of faith in their churches. Those habits were Bible reflection, practicing community, investing in others, practicing generosity and developing soft callouses. I should have added at least one more to that list- prayer. As I went through the book of James in preparation for this series that's the one category that James talks about that doesn't fit into the list of 5. We'll talk more about prayer next week but for now, developing sensitive callouses.

What does it mean to develop sensitive callouses? It's something James spends an awful lot of time on. By the time we're done with this series I imagine of all the 6 characteristics of highly effective followers of Jesus, develop sensitive callouses will probably be the one James talks about most. So what does that mean? What does it look like to develop sensitive callouses? It means developing a way of looking at and handling trouble and pain when it comes your way that doesn't crush you and doesn't turn you into a stone- hardened and impervious to this life and the people who live around you. James invites us to live a life where we aren't surprised by trouble when it comes our way (Pollyannas are often crushed beneath the weight of trouble and pain if they think they are/should be immune to the troubles of this world). He also invites us to live our lives in such a way that we aren't turned into sour pussies who let the gloom and doom of this world turn them into a hardened shell of a person who can't see anything good in this life.

How do we do that? Well we'll be looking at that question over the next few days- but it starts with being willing to see the world as it is (both good and bad) and then learning how to handle trouble when it comes.

Wednesday:

When troubles of any kind come your way... James 1:2 (NLT)

I have told you these things so you may have peace in me. In this world you will have troubles, but be brave for I have defeated the world! John 16:33 (NCV)

Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad... 1 Peter 4:12-13 (NLT)

Reflection: So now we are finally ready to look at what James says we should do to develop sensitive callouses. The first step is to expect trouble. Every single writer in the New Testament warns the reader to expect trouble. I've picked out just a couple of these scriptures for you to read today but they are pretty much repeated over and over again in the pages of the New Testament. James says "when" trouble comes... not if. Not maybe. Not if you do something wrong then trouble will come your way. No... when. Expect trouble.

James older brother, Jesus Himself spoke over and over again about trouble in this world. In the book of John, Jesus spends about 3 chapters warning His followers about the trouble that is coming to them. If I was going to sum up John chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 & 17 I'd say that Jesus was warning us, "if you think they treat Me badly, just wait til you see what they do to you!" Not exactly what I consider to be the greatest pep talk in the history of the world. But I'm wrong... it was. Why? Because it created a community of folks who viewed reality accurately. They spent their lives expecting trouble. I guess you could say that the pages of the New Testament can be summed up nicely by the immortal words of Professor Harold Hill from The Music Man:

Oh... we got trouble!

James, Jesus, Peter, Paul, John, Jude and whoever wrote the book of Hebrews tells us over and over again- Christians... we got trouble! Trouble with a capital "T" and that rhymes with "D" and that stands for devil! Although to be fair to the devil (not that I think being fair with the devil is important but it might be important for us to understand this truth if we're going to develop sensitive callouses) I think he gets blamed for WAY more trouble than he actually had a hand in (unless you want to trace every bit of trouble on the planet back to the original sin of Adam & Eve in the Garden as the entry point for all trouble into this world in which case... ok... you've got a point but let me explain what I'm talking about here...).

Because of sin we now live in a broken, sinful, fallen world. Does the devil and his minions (not the cute yellow ones but the disturbing demonic ones) cause their fair share of trouble in this world? Yes. But I've known people who blame satan for every problem that comes their way. I just don't think he's that efficient. Sometimes trouble is caused by the powers of darkness and evil. Sometimes the trouble in my life is a direct result of my own stupid decisions. Sometimes the trouble in my life is a direct result of someone else's stupid decisions (drunk drivers, criminals that want to rob or hurt, loved ones who just make bad choices...). Sometimes the trouble in my life is a direct result of natural forces (earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, storms...). Sometimes the trouble in my life is the direct result of sickness and disease. And sometimes the trouble in my life is just an accident that nobody and nothing is responsible for. It's not all the devil's doing.

No matter the reason for the trouble in my life, James (and Paul and Peter and James and Jesus and Jude...) says we should always be on the lookout for it. Why? Because this world is a place of trouble. If that sounds like a pessimistic view of reality then you need to keep reading because James (and Paul and Peter and Jesus and Jude...) wouldn't agree with that assessment. Solomon might but he didn't have the benefit that the New Testament writers had- a guy named Jesus who demonstrated perfectly what a life lived not based on what exists beneath-the-sun but rather a life with roots firmly entrenched in the reality that only exists above-the-sun should look like.

The New Testament writers would say that because of what Jesus has done (you know... He defeated the world) trouble can not only be weathered but it can actually be redeemed and it can be refining. Jesus makes good come out of our pain and troubles but it doesn't just happen... there's a process for weathering the troubles in our lives that James (and Peter and Paul and Jesus and Jude...) teach us over and over again. It begins with expecting trouble... not being surprised by it. But that's not the end of the process... more tomorrow but maybe for today spend a few minutes asking yourself if you expect trouble in your life and how you handle it when it comes? There's a spectrum here- from Pollyanna to Eeyore. One extreme never expects trouble... the other expects nothing but trouble. Either extreme will bring all kinds of pain to your life. Where do you fall on that spectrum?

Thursday:

When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. James 1:3 (NLT)

So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you. 1 Peter 4:19 (NLT)

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. Ephesians 6:10-11 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so expecting trouble is the first step to developing sensitive callouses in our lives. But just expecting it won't create within us the kind of life where trouble and pain is unable to knock us down. There's something else that we are warned to do and that is, prepare for trouble in our lives.

Have you ever watched one of those silly westerns from the 50s or 60s where a town is facing a horde or rampaging bandits? Last weekend I showed a clip from a spoof on one of those movies- The Three Amigos (starring Steve Martin, Chevy Chase & Martin Short). Yes... I know that movie is a tiny bit silly but it makes the point about preparing for trouble- unless you prepare you can't expect to defeat the trouble in your life. In The Three Amigos they prepare by sewing. That's right... sewing. I don't want to give out any spoilers for those of you who are going to run right out and rent the movie so as to better prepare yourselves for handling trouble when it comes your way but suffice it to say... they prepare for the trouble that is coming to their town.

Every single writer of the New Testament (and I imagine every single writer of the Old Testament) warns us to prepare now for the trouble that will surely arrive at your door some day. That's one thing that I know for a fact about every single person reading this devotional

thought right now- you are either facing trouble in your life right now or you have had to face trouble in your life in the not too distant past or... trouble is coming to your life soon (aren't you glad you decided to read this today so you could be encouraged? ;o)

Ok- I have a confession to make here. I'm reusing a lot of this devotional from a couple of years ago when I preached through James for the first time as a pastor at Riverside. I used to say that a lot- trouble is coming. Expect it. Prepare for it. If you aren't going through it right now then you probably just came out of it and if neither of those things are true then get ready because it's probably right around the corner. I urged all of us to prepare ourselves for trouble. I have to admit- I felt a bit guilty at the time because my life had been relatively trouble free for longer than I care to admit. But now having experienced the extent to which trouble can come into the life of a human being in ways I never dreamed of I'm so grateful that the writers of the Bible seem so single mindedly focused on how we as followers of Jesus should go about experiencing the suffering that is inevitably hurtling towards us at breakneck speed. I wish I could say I handled it with the grace and dignity that I've watched some of you handle your pain with but each of us is different. I'm grateful for your example to me and everyone else at Riverside.

Jesus said it best (I know... go figure!) when He said in John 16:33 (and I'm paraphrasing here a little bit but not much)- "if you live in this world, then I'm sorry but you've got troubles. But the good news is, I've defeated this world so if you're with Me then I'll show you how to defeat the world in your own life."

Now that is good news, isn't it? Jesus promises us that even though we do have to walk through troubles in our own lives, we will never have to walk through them alone. We get to walk through them with the One Who turns crucifixions into resurrections. The next time you catch yourself thinking, "nothing good could possibly come out of this," remember Who you're walking with. But just walking with Him isn't enough. We have to prepare for the trouble to come. How? By becoming more and more like the One who defeated the world. By practicing the 6 habits of highly effective followers of Jesus (prayer, Bible reflection, practicing community, investing in others, practicing generosity & developing sensitive callouses). Paul calls it "putting on the full armor of God" in Ephesians chapter 6. Peter calls it "practicing righteousness" (and righteousness isn't about perfection... it's about choosing a pursue a life where your goal is to do what's right... you know... kind of like Jesus did) in 1 Peter chapter 4. John calls it "being faithful" in Revelation chapter 2.

Preparing for trouble is all about practicing the 6 habits. As you live a life of prayer, Bible reflection, community, investing in others & generosity it will make you more like the One Who has defeated the world. Then when trouble strikes you will be expecting it and you will be as prepared as you can be to deal with it. Then there's only one thing left to do. Tomorrow we'll talk about that but for today, spend some time thinking about how we'll you're preparing for the trouble that Jesus says is surely on its way to your door. Are you practicing the 6 habits? Which habits are you doing well with? Which ones could use a little work? They all work together to create the kind of life where you can stand up to whatever trouble this world happens to throw your way.

Friday:

So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. James 1:4 (NLT)

Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm... Ephesians 6:13-14 (NASB)

Reflection: Ok... so I'm expecting trouble. I've been preparing for trouble by practicing the 6 habits of highly effective follower of Jesus (prayer, Bible reflection, practicing community, investing in others, practicing generosity & developing sensitive callouses). Now what? Well now, when the trouble comes, you stand your ground. Did you notice in James 1:4 when James says to "let it grow" (I know... now you have that "Frozen" song buzzing about in your head... here's your first opportunity to handle terrible troubles whenever they come your way... at least it is if you are as sick of that song as many in our culture today are ;o).

What does he mean by "let it grow"? Well, he's talking about a process. It starts with expecting trouble, then continues with preparing for trouble by practicing the 6 habits and it finishes with not trying to get out of the trouble prematurely or in a way that will do more damage than the original trouble ever could have done on its own. That phrase in James 1:4, "let it grow" is actually just one Greek word. And that single Greek word in James 1:4 is what theologians call a "hapax legomenon". I know... if someone said that to me I'd be very tempted to say, "gesundheit" or "if you do you're going to have to clean it up!" but in this case I think it's important for us to understand what this particular hapax legomenon means.

A hapax legomenon is nothing more than a word in the Bible that is found only once in the entire Bible. They are fairly rare so when they pop up it makes theologians wonder why the writer chose to use that particular word. The Greek word that here is translated with the phrase, "let it grow" literally means to "stand". It was a word used in the military for what an army should do when being attacked by a greater but more undisciplined force. The Romans did it all the time. They prepared their legionnaires for this kind of battle and because of their discipline and preparation the Roman army routinely decimated armies that were as much as 10 times their number. This word was shouted out by a general reminding the army that because of their discipline and preparation they will still be standing after this seemingly impossible trouble coming their way is long gone.

And the word didn't just mean to stand (Greek words were like that... they'd take the regular word for "stand" and add a qualifier to it to give it a more intense meaning). In this case the word James uses is to "hyper-stand". I'm not sure how best to try to convey what a Greek language reader would have understood when he/she read this word. Basically what I think James is trying to say to the Christians he's writing to who are in the midst of the most trouble they've ever seen is, to stand even when it looks like things are hopeless and to keep doing what they've already been doing to prepare. Have you been praying in preparation for the trouble that you've been expecting. Then while you are standing your ground keep on praying. Don't let the trouble stop you from practicing to become more like the One Who has defeated the world. Have you been practicing Bible reflection in preparation for the trouble that you've been expecting. Then while you are standing your ground keep on reflecting.

Don't let the trouble stop you from practicing to become more like the One Who has defeated the world. Have you been practicing community in preparation for the trouble that you've been expecting. Then while you are standing your ground keep on practicing community. Don't let the trouble stop you from practicing to become more like the One Who has defeated the world. Basically James is saying, keep practicing the 6 habits of highly effective followers of Jesus especially once the trouble has hit. It is the only thing that will get you through whatever you're going through.

Is it easy? Not even close. Does it make sense? Not always... and it gets even more confusing and frustrating as the troubles we face go up in severity (troubles have a spectrum too... stubbing my toe or stepping in a puddle on one end and the death of a loved one probably on the other end). But James (and Peter and Paul and John and Jesus) would all have the same advice- I love what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6 about handling trouble- put on the full armor of God and then-

Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm! Ephesians 6:13-14 (NASB)

I pray I will be ready to stand firm on the day of trouble. And I pray you will be able to stand firm on the day of trouble. If we are expecting trouble and preparing for trouble then we will be able to stand firm on the day of trouble. Just as James stood firm on the day he was hauled up to the top of the Temple and ordered to reject Jesus. James stood firm... even when that trouble led him to death's door. He never would have been able to do that if he hadn't been preparing.

So hyper-stand. It is in the standing that our callouses are developed- but it is in the preparation and learning to be more like Jesus that we remain sensitive to the world and the people who live in it. Both are imperative.