

Episode: James Series No. 03

Narrator: Peter

Primary Scriptures: James 1:2-8; 5:7-11

Story Summary: Verses with content about suffering

Location: Kingdom of Judea (Israel)

Time: Circa 50 AD

Suggested Memory Scriptures: James 1:2-3, 5; 5:8

Most people in the modern world try very hard to avoid suffering. It is unpleasant, and few of us want to endure things that are unpleasant. Yet the Bible presents suffering not just as something that is unavoidable but also a condition that might be sent from God, something that can result in enormous benefits if endured properly.

Suffering is a major theme in the New Testament. Jesus promises his followers they will encounter it, and Paul and Peter both write about suffering for the cause of Christ. They all say that overcoming suffering has a multitude of benefits. They never said, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” but they do seem to share that sentiment.

Most English translations soften James’ opening statement, but he begins his book by saying he is a slave of God and Jesus. He is a voluntary slave, but a slave nonetheless. And slaves expect to suffer. This would not come as a surprise to his ancient audience, since up to one-third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves.

James writes his letter to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. This description probably means he is writing to Jewish Christians who had left Israel due to persecution from Jewish leaders. At the time this letter was written, the majority of Christians were formerly Jews. As the leader of the church in Jerusalem, James was probably acquainted with many of the Christians who had left Israel.

Our modern ears might find it surprising that James does not encourage his audience to evangelize by teaching the Gospel. Instead, he focuses on telling them how to live as Christians wherever they go. And one thing James is sure of is this: they will face temptations and tests, and will suffer. So, he opens his letter with one of the most puzzling of all greetings: “Count it all joy when you face trials of many kinds.” You can only imagine how the early, persecuted Christians who heard this must have reacted.

Much later in the letter, James encourages Christians to be patient in the face of suffering. Be patient, wait, stand firm, don’t grumble, don’t judge. In coming years, Christians will cling to these words as the Romans begin their persecution and as some succumb to their trials, recant their faith, and betray their fellow Christians.

What can those who successfully endure persecution expect to receive as their reward? Mercy and compassion from the Lord, the judge who is standing nearby.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you define suffering? How do you think God defines suffering?
2. What does the New Testament tell you about suffering?
3. How does James say to react when facing trials?
4. What relationships are there between trials (James 1:2-4) and wisdom (James 1:5-8)?
5. Does James 1:7 apply only to the subject of wisdom?
6. Does James 5:7-9 apply only to the subject of patience in the face of suffering, or patience in all things?
7. What is one possible implication in James 5:7-8?
8. Who does James point to as examples of perseverance while suffering?
9. What does James 5:11 tell about the nature of God? Will knowing that help you while you suffer?
 1. To expect it, especially if you follow Jesus. That suffering can produce many benefits. That Jesus suffered, so there you will suffer if you imitate Jesus.
 3. To count it as *pure* joy.
 7. That James was expecting Jesus to return in his life time.
 8. The prophets and Job.
 9. He is full of compassion and mercy.

Application Questions:

1. James 1:2 says there are trials of many kinds. Name some of the trials you and your friends face. Which is the most difficult? How do you face that trial with pure joy? How do you define joy in that circumstance? Does James 1:3-4 help explain why you should count it joy?
2. James 1:5-8 says to ask God for wisdom if you lack it. Do you lack wisdom? Would you admit it if you did? Do you ask God for more? Why would you want to be wiser than you already are? Which book of the Bible would you turn to in an effort to learn more about wisdom? (Proverbs)
3. James 5:9 says not to grumble against your fellow Christians. What does that mean? Search the NIV for the word *grumble* and see what happened in the Old Testament when people grumbled.
4. Many people refuse to believe in God because of all the suffering and pain in the world. James 5:11 doesn't refute or give a reason for suffering, but it does maintain that God is full of compassion and mercy. Can you reconcile those things? If you cannot reconcile them, can you still believe that God is full of compassion and mercy?

Application Questions for Teens:

1. Do you think modern media and schools teach people to avoid suffering or to endure it and grow through it? Does the saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" make any sense to you?
2. How do you define *suffering*? Where do you think you got that standard?
3. Does suffering come from God, Satan, or consequences of people's behavior? Or all three?