

James 1:1-4 (NIV)

¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Luke 24:13-25 (NIV)

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

¹⁹ “What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

²⁵ He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

On Reeling from Trials

This morning I want to focus primarily on our gospel passage from Luke, but first I want to highlight that our second reading, where St. James writes to believers in verse 2, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” James is acknowledging the reality that to be a human living in this world means we will experience trials of many kinds - and no shortage of them - throughout our lives. Now, in a bit we’ll get to exhortation to consider it *pure joy* whenever we face trials. But the good news I want to proclaim today is that when we *are* faced with trials or adversity, no matter how minor they may be or how major and even downright awful they may be, though God is in no way pleased it’s happening to us, we *can* expect God to be at work to bring good from it.

So, I wonder if we might consider - each of us - what sort of trials we may have gone through or even be going through right now. Some trials can be *major* ones when they are particularly devastating, life-altering, or prolonged. Just a few examples could include the death of a loved one, the loss of a job,

a significant illness, though there are obviously endless possibilities. Are there any trials like this that are still reverberating from the past or that you are going through even now?

So, there are major trials, and then there are other trials that are at least comparatively minor, but are still trials nonetheless, which can cause us great frustration or anxiety or confusion or disappointment or overwhelm. In fact, I had one such little trial this week.

The short version is we'd been having this issue with our washer - our clothes washer - constantly getting off balance no matter how small the load, where we'd have to rearrange the load multiple times just to get the cycle to finish. But I'd actually had this persistent issue with a different washer years ago and the fix was pretty simple: you just replace the four suspension rods with a YouTube video as your guide. So, I assumed it was this same issue, I asked A.I. which rods would fit my model of washer, and Amazon got 'em to me in two days. But as I got into the repair I was having the hardest time, and a few hours later I realized, "Oh, the rods I bought were two inches shorter than the rods I was replacing." So, then I had to order the correct rods, which kept our washer out of service another two days. But, after those came in and I spent another couple hours installing them, I turned on the washer and the problem was *still* happening: it was still getting off balanced. At which point I did a little more investigating, figured out after five days of gnashing my teeth - and perhaps even a little weeping - I figured out the cause was another issue that basically meant the washer had to be replaced.

Now, again, in the grand scheme of things this is a very minor bit of adversity, and yet it was still a trial where I absolutely felt frustration, confusion about what was going on or what to do, and eventually disappointment about all that time and effort being for naught. And I know we've all had experiences like this; perhaps *you* even had one this week, too. It could be in a practical matter like my trial, or all sorts of other things like someone you care about hurting you in an unexpected way, a short term medical challenge, a parenting challenge, whatever.

But, while some trials *are* minor, as we turn our attention to today's gospel passage Luke tells us about two followers of Jesus who are in the midst of going through a *major* trial, to say the least. Now, this passage is taking us back to the day of Jesus' resurrection. Where last week's passage about Thomas took us forward to a week later, now we've backtracked to only hours after Jesus' resurrection, on that Sunday afternoon. And Luke tells us about Cleopas and his companion who had also been following Jesus, but now are absolutely reeling from Jesus being crucified.

The two of them are walking to the town of Emmaus when the risen Jesus comes upon them, walking that way as well. But initially their eyes are kept from recognizing Him; to them he is just another traveler. On a day like this, the road would've been packed with pilgrims leaving Jerusalem following Passover and it was common in those days for strangers who were travelling to join one another and strike up a conversation. So that's what incognito Jesus does. He even seems to interrupt their conversation, and asks them what they're talking about. And, according to Luke, they suddenly stop, and stand still, because they are amazed that their fellow traveler seems not to have heard what transpired in Jerusalem just days before. With a hint of sadness, Cleopas asks, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" Well, incognito Jesus plays dumb, so Cleopas proceeds to detail how Jesus of Nazareth, a mighty man of God, had been delivered up by their own chief priests and put to death by crucifixion. In verse 21, he says, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." And even though Cleopas goes on to explain that Jesus' tomb had been found and verified empty that very morning, and that the women who first found it reported a vision from an angel saying Jesus was alive, from the context we can tell that they do not believe he is risen. Considering their notable sadness, Cleopas' words that they "had" believed, and also walking away from Jerusalem is a pretty peculiar way to respond to reports of an empty tomb.

In fact, I would suggest that heading out of Jerusalem indicates a flight response to this world-shaking trial they're in the midst of: an escapism teetering on abandoning their faith in Jesus,

which is understandable if they think Jesus remains dead. And, honestly, we probably all know folks who have responded to major and devastating trials by walking away from the Lord. And it's usually due to unfulfilled expectations. We expect God to heal our loved one and He doesn't, we expect God to fulfill some life dream we have and He doesn't; there is some of the evil that happens in the world that is bad enough that we expect God would intervene and put a stop to it, but He doesn't.

Trials can have a way of exposing our misunderstandings of God and His ways & what He really promises. And that's exactly what's happened with these two fleeing to Emmaus. You see, these two would have lived their whole lives being taught and believing that God would send His promised messiah to rescue their people politically, from Roman occupation. And in their time following Jesus they had come to believe that He was this Messiah. But when Jesus was put to death by Rome instead of overthrowing them, this was clearly proof to them that they had been wrong about Jesus: that he wasn't the messiah, because he hadn't brought the salvation - or changed their lives - in the way they expected. So of course Jesus is not happy that they're reeling from what's happened, but He does seize this opportunity to correct their misunderstanding: saying to them in verse 25, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And then he explains how this is what the scriptures really taught about the Messiah.

So, sometimes we can go through a trial really well, that demonstrates how we have grown, but other trials we go through can have a way of exposing misunderstandings or misplaced expectations we have of God. This is what James means when he says these trials test our faith: they can expose what's off in our beliefs. The good news is that when we are faced with trials of any kind - no matter how big or small, though God is in no way pleased it's happening to us, we *can* expect God to be at work to bring good from it.

So, sometimes a trial may expose *misunderstandings* of God or the faith that the Lord wants to refine. Or, in other instances trials may have a way of exposing something in our *character* that falls short of Christlikeness.

And I think this was at least one fruit of my fiasco with the washer. Something I didn't mention yet is that when those new parts first arrived, Amanda mentioned, "Hey, before you repair it, I've got a few loads of laundry I wanna run through in case the repair takes longer than you expect." Now, I did hear that request, but when the parts arrived I happened to have the afternoon free, I had the parts and Amanda & the kids were out somewhere, and I had done this repair in the past on another machine and it only took an hour. So, I consciously decided, "Nah, I'm gonna go ahead and do it." So then, when things went sideways, I was *not only* frustrated and confused about what to do next, but I also had the guilt of ignoring Amanda's request and not even telling her before I took the washer apart. So, however the situation ultimately worked out with the washer, the trial of it confronted me with my lack of consideration of others, not to mention maybe some overconfidence I had in my DIY abilities and in A.I. to tell me the correct part to buy.

And again, is God happy about the difficulty I was experiencing in going through this minor trial? No. But have you ever noticed how learning truths through experiences can be a lot more effective than just being told or reading what the truth is?

For example, the truths that Jesus loves us, that he will provide for us, that he will never leave us nor forsake us, and so on. Like it or not: our hearts come to grasp these so much better from experiencing God's faithfulness through trial than from just reading these truths in the Bible. #

And that's certainly what happens for the two disciples Luke's telling us about.

When they arrive in Emmaus, Jesus acts as if He is going to keep travelling on, but they invite him to stay. And verse 30 says that when He is at table with them, he takes the bread and blesses and breaks it and gives it to them. Now, perhaps there's something in the way He does this that reminded them of the many times Jesus had done it before – whether at the feeding of the 5,000 or some other occasions. But somehow, we're told, their eyes are opened, and they recognize Jesus.

Of course, just as these two recognize Him, He then vanishes from their sight. Immediately, they say to one another, "I knew it! I knew there was something about this man!" They ask, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (v32). So, they return to Jerusalem full of faith, where they learn Jesus has since appeared to Simon Peter, and they explain "what had happened on the road, and how (Jesus) was known to them in the breaking of the bread."

And, as a side note: the Fraction, the breaking of the bread that the priest does in the Eucharistic Prayer, is meant in part as a reference to how Jesus made Himself known to the two in Emmaus.¹ And we remember it with the hope that as we receive Holy Communion our hearts might see Him more clearly and fully.

The good news is that when we are faced with trials of any kind - no matter how big or small, though God is in no way pleased it's happening to us, we *can* expect God to be at work to bring good from it. And that good is most often God continuing to heal our understanding of Him and His ways or our character shortcomings. But even though God is at work in our trials, this doesn't mean that the way we respond to them doesn't matter or have impact. When things got bad, these guys didn't *have* to head to Emmaus, and flee their faith and community. Does God's grace cover that? Sure. But could there have been some better ways to respond? Probably.

And so, the next time we find ourselves in a trial that devastates us or causes us to feel hopeless, or to just feel frustrated, disappointed, anxious, or confused - maybe we're even feeling that way about something right now - whether it's a small trial or a big one, rather than turning toward our Emmaus we might ask God for the grace to remain in Him; that we might turn to Him and wonder "God, how are you going to show your faithfulness this time?"

This is what James means by "joy". Biblical joy is not happiness - this is often misunderstood - biblical joy is *confidence* - confidence in any circumstance - that God *is* with us and *is* at work and will not leave us but will see us through.

In every trial and tribulation, we can be assured that God is with us - just like Jesus was with those two on the road though their eyes were blind to it - and that He is always working for our good. Just as we break the bread at the fraction, just as His body was broken, our lives in this world will include some breaking as well, but the Lord wants to build us up even stronger from it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹ The Fraction is the moment in the Eucharistic Prayer when the Celebrant breaks the consecrated Bread (BCP p. 135; Worship Guide p. Q).

In addition to the obvious references to Jesus breaking the bread at the Last Supper and the Feeding of the 5,000, the Fraction has two other scripture allusions.

The first is when Jesus encountered the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but he wasn't made known to them until they had a meal and he broke the bread. (Luke 24:13-35). Likewise, in the Eucharist, Jesus is being made known to us in the bread.

Second, the splitting of the bread in the Fraction reminds us of when the Temple curtain that separated the people from the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death (Matthew 27:50-54), which was a sign of how the blood Christ shed opened access for us to draw near to God despite our sin (as explained by Hebrews 10:19-22).