

Series: James

January 10, 2016

Title: Refiner's Fire

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Text: James 1:1-8

Trouble

Letter to God's New Israel:

It's a short letter, tucked away near the end of the New Testament. It's called simply "James." But this little letter opens the door to God's richest treasures: the treasures of His Wisdom. Taking some time to learn from James -- believed to be Jesus' own earthly brother, and the leader of the Jewish/Christian church in Jerusalem until his death in 62 A.D. -- is a good way to begin a brand new year.

James begins the letter according to the literary custom of the time, by first identifying himself as the author, then identifying the people he is writing to:

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James 1:1 NIV

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

In other words, this is a letter to God's New Israel. James presents himself as servant of the One Creator God *and* of God in the flesh: Jesus the Messiah King. He refers to Jesus as "Lord," the Greek form of the Holy Name of God -- Yahweh -- in the Hebrew Bible. At long last, "Immanuel!" God With Us!

He writes to the "Twelve Tribes scattered among the nations." The 12 Tribes is normally a designation of Israel. Israel had long ago been scattered across the known world. But James is writing to the New Israel, the new People of God, who have been birthed by God's Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus.

This is a letter to God's New Israel!

When Trouble Comes Knocking...

James begins his letter with what seems like a strange command:

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James 1:2 NIV

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

I don't know about you, but I seldom put the words 'joy' and 'trials' together. I spend most of my time trying to *stay away from trials and problems*. I'm sure you do too. So what is James saying here?

The word he uses for 'trial' has two meanings: Trial or Temptation. It's the word Jesus uses in the Lord's Prayer when He instructs us to pray: "Lead us not into temptation..." It's a word, therefore, that comes with a choice: When trouble comes knocking, will we see it as a test, or will we be enticed by it as a temptation?

Make the right choice and you will discover the answer to the riddle of how trouble and joy fit together.

A Refining Process:

Trial or Temptation? Just ask a mountain climber how hard it is sometimes to see the joy in the climb! For instance, here is a recommended training regime for climbing Mt. Everest:

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- Trek for 10 days to Base Camp (17,500'). Arrive April 1.
- Climb to Camp 1 (19,675') – April 7.
- Climb *back down* to Base Camp – April 8.
- Climb to Camp 2 (21,000'0 – April 11.
- Back to Base Camp – April 13.
- Climb to Camp 2 – April 17.
- Climb to Camp 3 (23,625') – April 19.
- Back to Base Camp – April 20
- Trek all the way down to 12,500'!
- Back to Base Camp one more time – April 26.
- Go for the Summit – May 1-7.

Imagine working so hard to just get to the mountain, only to find that you have to essentially climb it *twice* if you wish to succeed. How tempting to see those acclimatization climbs as optional. How tempting to hang out Base Camp swapping stories instead of getting up in the wee hours of the morning to climb through the incredibly dangerous ice field. Why not “save your strength” for the main event?

But if you give into temptation, you will bonk on the mountain. You simply won't have the resources to endure.

The same thing happens in the other mountains in our lives. James explains the trouble/joy connection by saying:

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James 1:3-4 NIV

Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

For people who are trusting God to guide them in their New Exodus journey, trials serve to refine their faith and make them strong and complete. They are a vital part of toughening us up for the push to the summit.

Ask for Wisdom

Ask for Wisdom:

But it takes more than will power to climb life's mountains! That's why the next thing James says focuses on our need for God's Presence in our climbs:

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James 1:5 NIV

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given you.

When we hear the word 'wisdom,' we probably think of having an insight into how to solve a problem or avoid making bad decisions. But for James, Wisdom was a virtual equivalent to the Holy Spirit. Proverbs 8 tells how Wisdom was at God's side during the Creation of the world. Wisdom says:

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Proverbs 8:27-28 NIV

I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep...and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.

When we ask, the Holy Spirit gives us God's Wisdom so that we can see our story from His perspective. Like a good mountain guide, He helps us keep the summit in view when we feel so tired or discouraged that we can't imagine going on.

Make up your mind!

Tests and trials have a way of making us get down to what we really believe. They reveal who we really are. They expose every chink in our armor. But they also give us a chance to grow our faith.

James writes:

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James 1:6-8 NIV

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Facing a trial or test is not a "have your cake and eat it too" proposition! You have to decide whether God is going to see you through or not. You can't just add a little faith in God to the mix, like putting salt on your French fries. Dithering is not an option. Sitting down to think things over won't get you any further up the mountain.

For the people of James' day, the sea, with its storms and waves, was a picture of *chaos*. It stood for the very opposite of God's good Creation. No wonder, then, that James compares doubting the Creator God with falling back into the brokenness and chaos of this world. God has much better plans for us than that, but only if we give Him the chance.

As Jesus says:

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Luke 11:13 NIV

"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Refiner's Fire**The Hillary Step:**

Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay were the first to ever climb Mt. Everest. They had no one to guide them or tell them what to expect. They made first tracks in every sense of the word.

And there came a moment just below the summit where they met the greatest obstacle in the entire climb. Hillary describes it this way:

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We reached the south summit of Everest, which is 28,700 feet, and then we looked along the summit ridge, which is quite an impressive narrow ridge.... But half way along the ridge there's a rock step. It's about 40 feet high, and I cut steps along the side of the ridge until we reached the bottom of the rock step. And looking up at the rock step at 29,000 feet, it really did look extremely difficult to overcome.

Hillary found a way up the cliff and passed the test. He goes on to say:

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That was really the first moment during the whole of the expedition that I was confident that we were going to get to the top. But overcoming that rock step, which we knew existed -- we had seen it from far below -- made me feel the confidence that we were going to succeed. And sure enough, on we went, and we ultimately reached the top. Funnily enough, that step is now called the Hillary Step. Any climber who climbs Everest from that south side, at some stage has to go up the Hillary Step.

Refiner's Fire:

In every one of life's tests there's a Hillary Step. There comes that moment when things get hard, so hard we would rather give up or give in. The test reveals the weaknesses, the doubts, the double-mindedness that has been lurking in us all along. If we want to go forward, our faith will have to grow.

The Good News is that God is ready at just that moment to give us His Wisdom, His Holy Spirit, His Presence to grow us in the middle of the test. A situation or circumstance that looks like chaos becomes a place where God creates something brand new. Out of the test comes perseverance. Peter Davids describes this perseverance as "*a new facet of the believer's character that could not exist without testing.*" (Davids, *Commentary on James*, p.68).

Sir Edmund Hillary has one thing named for him on Mt. Everest. It isn't the summit. It's that place where he could have turned around. It's the place where he overcame his greatest obstacle. It's the place where he came to know he would reach the top of the world.

God will do the same for you. But only if you ask for His Wisdom.