



◦ TITLE

On Suffering Lovingly

◦ SUBTITLE

Living with Joy in Times of Pain

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● **EBOOK 2**

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On Suffering Lovingly

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Start

Let me plunge right in with a devastating truth: The leading cause of death for people my age and younger in 2020 was not COVID-19.¹

It was not cancer, which in a normal year is at the top of the list.

It was not heart disease.

Can you guess?

It was suicide.

Death by self-harm has been on the rise for several years now – many doctors are even using the word “epidemic” – but it accelerated to a new intensity in the suffering incubator that was 2020 (and now 2021).

People are in *pain*.

The cascade effect of living through a global pandemic, followed by an economic meltdown (all experienced in social isolation), followed by, in my home city of Portland, over a hundred days straight of violence between protesters and police, followed by once-in-a-generation wildfires that shut the entire West Coast indoors for weeks, followed by a bitter election that showed us our nation is more divided than it's been since the Civil War, followed by a violent mob storming the Capitol in an unnerving cautionary tale of postmodern truth decay gone horribly off the rails in a social media shaped world, followed by an even more devastating wave of winter deaths from COVID-19 has been ...

Well, let's just say, *it's been a year*.

For most of us, one of intense pain.

On top of the heavy weight of personal tragedy many of us are living through – disease, the death of a loved one, economic troubles, etc. – we’ve also been caught in the middle of a political holy war between Left and Right, which, for many in our country, is a winner-take-all battle to the death. Hate has been justified and normalized on both sides. But the two – the personal and the political – are intertwined. In a previous era of social upheaval, the African American essayist James Baldwin had this insight:

“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”²

Behind the proliferation of hate, behind the fever pitch of outrage culture, behind the ranting and raving on social media from one tribe against another, is a country and a world in acute emotional pain.

Yet psychologists warn us to distinguish between “pain” and “suffering.” They are not synonymous.

Pain is what *is* – a global pandemic, the loss of a business, the death of a loved one, the fracture of American politics, the move to a post-truth society, etc.

While suffering is *our response* to what is. It’s the meaning we make (or don’t make) of our pain; it’s our emotional reaction; it’s our body’s way of first holding and then finding a healthy – or toxic – way to discharge the pain.

And for a lot of people, the result of suffering is trauma, a kind of deep emotional wound we carry in our body. A toxic memory that lives on in our body’s unconscious, sabotaging its inner immunity against the many diseases that threaten our soul’s life.

Trauma has been a near constant topic of conversation this year – and for good reason. We are learning to name our trauma (capital T or small t)³ and be gentle with ourselves in the process of healing. After all, God is.

But could we go further than that?

Could we dream beyond just healing? What if normal isn't good enough?

Could we dream beyond happiness, to depth? Or maturity? To Christlike character?

In the mid-'90s, the psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun developed a concept called Post-Traumatic Growth. The basic idea is that some people seem to grow as a result of trauma. They come out the other side of a painful experience, not just okay, but better. Stronger. Deeper.

As Tedeschi put it: "People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have, and a better understanding of how to live."⁴

Tedeschi and Calhoun went on to create the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, which was an attempt to measure pain's effect on growth in five areas:

1. Appreciation of life
2. Relationships with others
3. New possibilities in life
4. Personal strength
5. Spiritual change

In a time of pain or suffering, all five of these areas are rife with potential for the growth and expansion of our soul.

COVID-19 – and the chaos that has come with it – literally has the potential to make us or break us, to produce trauma or post-traumatic growth. Much of it has to do with our response and our relationships.

We don't know how much longer this pandemic, and the accompanying social unrest, will last. We were all hoping that by the beginning of 2021 life would start to return to normal. That, clearly, has yet to happen. And with the vaccine rollout far behind schedule, we likely have a long wait ahead until things open back up.

So, here's my question: How do we not just *survive* the coming season – be it a few more months or another year – but come out the other side of it with “appreciation for life, relationships with others, new possibilities,” a new inner strength and fortitude, and above all, spiritual formation in the image of Christ?

And, to dream even further, is there a way to travel this road together with joy?

For an answer, let's hear from the writer James, who was Jesus' brother and one of many figures in the New Testament who was very familiar with pain and suffering. James' words come to us from a place of both personal experience and spiritual authority.

The opening line of his letter reads as follows:

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

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 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.⁵

Most scholars date James' letter to around AD 65, right after a wave of persecution scattered the church all over the Mediterranean. The gospel that God had made the crucified Jesus both Lord and Messiah was a threat to the power brokers of both imperial Rome and the corrupt Jewish temple. They reacted with violence. Followers of Jesus faced a bitter decision: run from the government crackdown or die.

In fact, the word *scattered* used by James in verse 1 is *diaspora* in Greek; the same word is used in Acts 8:

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were *scattered* throughout Judea and Samaria ... Those who had been *scattered* preached the word wherever they went.”⁶

Thankfully, we in the West are not facing persecution in the true sense of the word. It's still legal for us to follow Jesus in public – at least, for now. Yet there are a few parallels between James' original recipients and modern readers. James is writing a letter to the church because they are no longer able to meet together in person. In a pre-digital world, a letter was the best option. In a similar way, we have not been together as a church in many months.

James is also writing to a church that is facing “trials of many kinds.” Not just one trial, but multiple, with a compound effect. And he is writing to a church that is most likely, if you read the subtext, very sad, as you can imagine.

If you relate at all to this scenario, James' opening salvo is full of wisdom that is more than worth our time and attention.

Let's parse it out, line by line.

The first word:

“Consider.”

In Greek, it's *hageomai*. It can also be translated “Count it all joy.” It means to do the math, add up the facts, calculate the sum total. The idea James is getting across is this: Run a mathematical calculation on your trials; sort the data into a loss column and a profit column. If you value what God values – and that's a large *if* for many of us – you will realize the result of trials is often a net-profit. We gain more than we lose.

I don't know about you, but I label most of 2020 (and now 2021) as a loss. My suffering has been minor compared to so many others, but we've all lost something – people we love, jobs, businesses, dreams, plans gone belly up, opportunities gone forever, freedoms, the ability to gather as a church or just sit around a table with family or friends.

With so much loss, it's easy to forget how much is in the gain column. Namely, the growth of a deeper and wider and stronger soul. A character that will last past this life and into the life to come.

Trials have the potential to give more than they take away.

James is saying, Do the mental spreadsheet, there's more profit than loss. Therefore – follow his thinking here – *the logical emotion is joy*.

Throw a party! Invite all your friends to join, yes, on Zoom, but still ... Open a bottle of the good stuff. Celebrate God's work in your soul.

Please note: He's not saying we are to have joy *in spite* of our trials, but *because* of them. More specifically, because of what they are doing *in* us.

Let's keep going:

“Consider it pure joy ...”

Pure joy, not mixed. Not one-part joy, three-parts sorrow. But *pure* joy.

The joy James is getting at here is a far cry from the American pursuit of happiness or “happenstance” (happy feelings based on circumstances). It’s a joy that, while not aloof or unaffected by circumstances, goes beyond them. It does not require our external world to be okay in order for our internal world to be okay. It’s a joy that can only come from one source: participation in the inner life of the Trinity, the ground of self-giving joy at the center of all reality. It’s the joy we see on display in the Trinity’s second member, Jesus, who said, “That my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”⁷

Charlie Dates of Chicago, one of the best preachers of our time, in a sermon on James 1 made this claim:

“God has a corresponding joy for every trial we find ourselves in ... This joy that we have, the world did not give it to us, and the world cannot take it away ... Circumstances did not give us this joy, so circumstances cannot take it away. God has a joy that defies our trails.”

In a similar ebullient tone, Bono once called joy an “act of defiance.”⁸ Joy is a rebellion against the counter trinity of satan, sin, and death. A resistance against the gravitational pull of entropy.

And when does James want us to apply this act of defiance?

“Whenever you face trials of many kinds.”

Note that it’s *when* we face trials, not if.

Trials *will* come.

Thomas Szasz, based on his years as a therapist serving those in deep pain, wrote:

“The simplest and most ancient of human truths: namely, that life is an arduous and tragic struggle; that what we call ‘sanity,’ what we mean by ‘not being schizophrenic,’ has a great deal to do with competence, earned by struggling for excellence; with compassion, hard won by confronting conflict; and with modesty and patience, acquired through silence and suffering.”⁹

Job – the archetype of suffering in the Old Testament – was much more concise: “Man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward.”¹⁰

Or in the language of Jesus himself, “In this world, you *will* have trouble.”¹¹

In a world still suffering under the weight of human and demonic sin, trouble is the rule, while ease is the exception to the rule.

That sounds harsh, nihilistic even, but acceptance of the fact that life is hard is not only the path to wisdom, but to joy. As M. Scott Peck writes on the opening page of *The Road Less Traveled* (one of my favorite books), when you expect life to be easy, it’s very hard, but when you *expect* it to be hard, in an ironic twist, it’s very good.

Next phrase:

“Whenever you *face* trials of many kinds.”

The word *face* here can also be translated “fall into” or “trip over.”

It’s a word picture: Imagine you’re walking along and everything is sunny, but then you trip over a crack in the pavement. One minute you’re humming along with the birds, the next you’re falling through the air and rethinking your health insurance plan.

One Greek Lexicon defines it as “to experience somewhat suddenly that which is difficult or bad.”¹² The past year is a great example. You don’t plan to lose your job or get sick and brush up against death, you “fall” into it.

The word for *trials* here is *peirasmos*. It can be translated as “trial” or “test” or “temptation,” but it’s also the Greek word for a “disaster” or – *wait for it* – “plague.”

Whenever you read the word *plague* in the New Testament, the word being translated into English is likely *peirasmos*.

Notice the end of the phrase:

“Trials of *many* kinds.”

The word *many* literally means “multi-colored.” Other translations have “various kinds.”

Major, minor.

Political, personal.

Economic, emotional.

The word refers to the various trials that make up life this side of Eden – from a car breaking down, to waking up with a kink in the neck, to the tragic death of a friend or family member, to a vicious disease or a violent mob storming the Capitol – and everything in between.

Think about what James is saying: Whenever we stumble and fall into various kinds of trials – trials that are not in the five-year plan, trials that we hate and cause deep pain – “consider it pure joy.”

Many of us are thinking, *Why in the world would I do that?*

And James anticipates our question and answers it in verse three:

“Because you *know* ...”

The word *know* is *genosco*. It's not head knowledge, but personal experience knowledge. The way you *know* your spouse or best friend, or *know* a restaurant you love, or *know* God.

If you follow Jesus for any length of time, you come to *know* ...

“... that the *testing* ...”

The word *testing* here means “to try to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing, often through actual use.”

It's not referring to the kind of test you take in high school or college, where you get the right or wrong answer. It's closer to the way car makers “test” a new SUV or off-road vehicle before they release it to the public. The engineers (and advertisers) from Land Rover or Toyota make all sorts of claims about the vehicle – it can go this far, over this kind of terrain, take this kind of pressure – but then they give it to a test driver and a film crew, and they just go beat the crud out of it. They run it through sand and mud and rock and river and roll it and bump it and push it to the limit and beyond.

To test: Does it actually have the capacity to do what its maker says it has the capacity to do? Or is it just hype and digital spin?

What a field test is to an off-road vehicle, trials are to disciples of Jesus – a test.

Of what?

“... of your *faith* ...”

The word *faith* here is *pistus*, and a lot of English speakers confuse the word *faith* with the word *belief*. They don't realize that *pistus* can either be

translated faith or faithfulness. Some argue a better English translation is the word *allegiance*.¹³

Belief has to do with your level of trust in and reliance on God. *Faith* has to do with how long you can hold to that trust and reliance on God through trials, through seasons of pain and suffering, when you feel like God has abandoned you or the cost of allegiance is too great to bear.

Faith in God *is* faithfulness *to* God. No matter what comes. No matter the cost. That's what's being put to the test right now – our *pistus*. Do we trust Jesus enough to stay faithful to him, to his way, to orthodoxy, to his church through 2020-2021 and beyond? Or will we quit and give up? Or capitulate to the gravitational pull of the Left or Right's competing visions of what the New Testament calls “the world”?

Now we're getting to the good part:

“The testing of your faith *produces perseverance*.”

The word *perseverance* is *hypomone* in Greek. Depending on what translation of the Bible you read, it can be translated as “perseverance” or “endurance” or “steadfastness.”

One Lexicon defines it as the “capacity to continue to bear up under difficult circumstances.”¹⁴

Hypomone is a kind of emotional resilience. An inner strength of will. A capacity to live and love when the wind of circumstances is against you. To continue under pressure.

But it's not just a grinding it out for Jesus and etching a permanent scowl into your face; it also comes with the buoyancy of hope.

We think of hope as being about the future, and it is; but it's *for* the present.

I define hope as the expectation of coming good based on the person and promises of God. Hope is a kind of emotional energy to live well in the present in light of what's coming in the future.

That's what trials have the potential to produce in us – a hopeful energy to keep going when life is hard.¹⁵

James ends his intro (and this whole thing is just his opening line, by the way) with a strong exhortation for those currently in a season of trouble:

“Let perseverance finish its work.”

I love Eugene Peterson's Message translation: “Don't try to get out of anything prematurely.” As in, before you mature.

Verse 4:

“So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

There's a play on words here in the Greek that we miss in the English translation: The word *finish* is the verb form, and the word *mature* is the noun form of the same Greek word – *telos*.

More literally it's, “Let perseverance *mature* you so that you become *mature*.”

Perseverance through trouble has the potential to develop in us a rich blend of emotional maturity and spiritual life, to the point where love and joy and peace and the inner life of the Trinity itself become our true nature. Where we actually become godly, or *God-like*. When the ancients used the word *theosis* in Greek, or “deification” in translation to English, what they meant was that the end goal of discipleship is becoming like the God we love.

And the word *complete* is a Greek word meaning “whole.” Hence the next

line, another play on words: “Not *lacking* anything.” The idea is that prior to our “various trials,” we were deficient in something; but our pain and suffering has not subtracted, as much as it’s *added* to us. Now, we are whole, well-developed, and mature.

Notice the link between perseverance and maturity: We don’t *think* our way into maturity, or even *feel* our way into maturity, we *persevere* our way into maturity.

Maturity is not the result of reading a lot of books or listening to a lot of podcasts or mastering a repertoire of self-help techniques. Maturity is the result of “a long obedience in the same direction.”¹⁶ It’s the cumulative effect of a *lifetime* of prayer and surrender to God as we persevere through various trials.

But here’s the key: This lifelong journey doesn’t have to be an emotional sludge; we can persevere with *joy*.

Of course, this isn’t the norm. Take an emotional poll of your friend group. Very few people are happy about the onslaught of a global pandemic, except maybe the shareholders of Zoom.

What cause for joy do we have that the rest of the world doesn’t?

Let me name three, all from James 1.

1. We are not alone; we’re a part of the family of God.

In the line-by-line exegesis of the text above, I skipped over one very important word in verse two: *adelphoi*, which is translated as “brothers and sisters.” The full line is “Consider it pure joy, *my brothers and sisters*, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”

Who is to “consider it pure joy”?

We are. Because we're *family*, in it together.

Even the word *you* is plural in Greek. Think about the implications of a “plural” experience of suffering versus a singular one. The past year has been traumatic for so many, but psychologists tell us trauma is what happens when people experience suffering *alone*.

The therapist Robert Stolorow has this insightful definition of trauma:

“Trauma is [when] severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held.”¹⁷

Trauma is not *just* about the level of intensity in suffering, i.e., when people experience suffering that is above and beyond the normal aches and pains of life. Many people live through extraordinary pain – a global pandemic, unexpected death of a child or spouse, the gruesome death of a fellow soldier in battle – and come out the other side healthy and strong. Trauma is *also* about the level of isolation.

When we experience suffering, we need a “relational home,” in Stolorow’s language. We need a relationship where we feel safe to open up. To let our soul bleed before another. We need another soul to hold our pain in compassion.

Many years ago, the social psychologist James Pennebaker conducted the first large scale study of trauma survivors. His goal was to determine why some people experience suffering and are devastated, and others experience but seem to not only come through it, but on the back side, often are *more* joyful and at ease than before. (Think back to the Post-Traumatic Growth from earlier.) Pennebaker’s hypothesis was that trauma for which there is a social stigma is harder to recover from than other forms of trauma. For example, he and his team researched sexual assault and the suicide of a spouse – two forms of trauma where they anticipated people

would feel shame. But they discovered their hypothesis was completely wrong. There was *zero* correlation between the nature of the trauma and the potential for recovery. It turned out, the number one factor in recovery was whether or not a person had family or a friend or some kind of an emotional support group to talk about and process the pain with. **18**

What people needed was a “relational home.” Those who did, were mostly spared any long-term negative effects.

If I’m reading Jesus and the New Testament authors correctly, they are calling us as followers of Jesus to be that relational home for one another. They envision the church as a family. Not a perfect community by any means, but one where we suffer through the world of sin together. Where we come together to banish loneliness from our hearts and hold each other’s pain in love.

Of course, all families are dysfunctional; it’s just a question of degree. And one of the great tragedies of the past year (and in my opinion, tactics of the enemy) has been that the church was often just as divided and hostile as the world. We can’t pretend otherwise.

For a growing number of Christians, especially in individualistic Western cities, the church is not their relational home, and often for good reason. Maybe because the church was structured more like a concert than a family dinner; maybe because the church was a place of wounding more than healing. For that, I am very sorry.

But the church failing to live up to Jesus’ vision of a family and relational home *is not a new problem*. Read the New Testament! Most of the “one another” commands (i.e., love one another, bear with one another, forgive one another) all assume relational toxicity, not health. Read Paul’s letters to the Galatians or Corinthians. And yet, Jesus and Paul and all the New

Testament authors continue to call the church to live into her identity as brothers and sisters. And their emphasis is not on what “the church” should be, but what *we* should be. So when “the church” lets us down, as it regularly does, the invitation is not to disengage and write it off, but *re-engage* with greater commitment. We must be for others what we desire them to be for us – a relational home.

The essential fact of discipleship is that we can’t follow Jesus alone. And Jesus designed the church as the relational home we persevere through pain and suffering with, as siblings in the family of God.

Second cause for joy:

2. As the family of God, we live by a whole other vision of life.

Again, James’s call to “consider it pure joy” was *not* written to *all* people, but to the “brothers and sisters,” to the family of God.

The joy he’s writing about does not make a lot of sense unless you are a follower of Jesus, *not* because we’re any better than those around us, but because we live by a very different worldview and system of meaning than that of our secular culture.

In his book *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, the New York pastor Timothy Keller has a great summary of how various worldviews (Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.) deal with pain and suffering.¹⁹ He makes a very compelling case that the secular, western worldview is the *least* equipped to deal well with any kind of loss or disappointment because it has no meaning to offer. The soil of secularism does not provide the nutrients required to persevere through something like a global pandemic, social isolation, and social unrest.

In a Darwinian materialist worldview, there is no meaning or purpose

to life beyond survival of the fittest. Life just *is*, a glorious – or not so glorious, depending on where and how you were born – accident. A cosmic coincidence.

The problems with this narrative (and it *is* a narrative, a story people tell in an attempt to make sense of the data points of the human experience) are far reaching. The human brain literally cannot live without meaning. Our brain was built by God to search out a cohesive story to make sense of the chaos of life.

If we follow Darwinian materialism down the rabbit hole, we end up in a dark, nihilistic place. Thankfully, very few people (atheists included) go down the rabbit hole. Instead, most people find some kind of meaning to life beyond survival of the fittest.

But all meanings are not created equal.

Philosophers talk about *discovered* meaning verses *developed* meaning. Discovered meaning comes from outside ourselves. It's transcendent, it's true whether we believe it or not. It's rooted in a sacred order and the fabric of the universe itself.

As followers of Jesus, we *discover* the meaning of life in the teachings of Jesus as they come to us in Scripture. For us, life is a school of love. Not love in the modern sense of desire or even affection and affinity, but what Jesus called *agape* – a willing of good toward another, no matter the cost to yourself. In this school of *agape*, we are learning (mostly through suffering) to move off what one of my seminary professors called “the egoic operating system,” where the motivation is what *I need* and *I want*. It's a way of life rooted in fear and a grasping for control that is antithetical to love. Because as long as we are run by ego and fear (and ego is mostly an attempt to avoid our deepest fears), we will act in ways that dishonor and

dehumanize those around us, because we *need* our life – and the people in our life – to go a certain way for us to be okay. This is the state *all* of us are born into. But as students of Jesus in his school of love, we are learning to move off the “old self” system and into a “new self” that is run by *agape*.

But a true secularist doesn't believe in *discovered* meaning, so they have to default to *developed* meaning, which is self-generated from within. It's based not on Scripture or a sacred order, but on a person's “authentic self” – their opinions and desires and likes and dislikes. A person's purpose in life might be to “make a dent in the universe” like Steve Jobs, or to end systemic racism in our time, or to become famous, or to kill it in their career or to make money or retire early or just to raise a family and enjoy the ride. For most people in my city, the default meaning of life (beyond survival) is just pleasure, or in more American language, “the pursuit of happiness.”

I'm not trying to be negative; I'm just pointing out that inside a secular worldview, suffering has little to no meaning. If happiness is the meaning of life, at best, suffering is an interruption to the real goal of living, if not – in the case of a problem we can't “fix,” like death or disease – a *permanent obstacle*.

Portland's local periodical, *The Williamite Weekly*, recently released an edition entitled “2020: Everyone Is Struggling with Mental Health. Here's Our Guide to Finding Peace.” The article was full of practical advice on “finding peace” with a lot of great ideas – mindfulness, therapy, lemon juice for breakfast, doing yoga on grass, etc. Being a Portland periodical, it also advocated several more dubious ideas like psychedelic mushrooms and eating mac and cheese at 2am (not kidding).

But there is *nothing* in the feature about finding meaning or purpose in our pain; *nothing* about growing as a person through adversity; and *no mention*

of leaning into community, coming together, or going deeper in relationships of mutual vulnerability and love.

Not one word.

But for us as followers of Jesus, we live by a whole other vision of the meaning of life. A vision we receive from Jesus himself, not from within, though in hearing his vision, it reveals the deepest desires of our heart and intuitions of our spirit. And in Jesus' vision of the meaning of life, suffering is rich, not only with meaning, but with potential to launch us into an even greater experience of life.

This is why the Apostle James calls on us to do a little math. There's a saying in the business world, "What gets measured gets valued," which means if what we value is a happy, problem-free life where we feel chronically happy, then the last year has been at least a disappointment, if not *a colossal disaster*. But if what we most value is becoming a person of *agape* through union with Jesus, then 2020-2021 has been the greatest opportunity many of us have ever had to grow and mature into a new level of possibility.

Rethink the last year of your life. In what ways have you grown? Been set free? What's been exposed in your heart, and then gently – or *not* so gently – removed? In what ways has this season actually set you up for greater joy than ever before?

Finally, James offers one last reason for joy:

3. God is at work in our pain to give us far more than we lose.

I'm no theological determinist.²⁰ In my view, suffering is rarely, if ever, *from* God, but it's almost always used *by* God. *If* – and this is no small if – we consent to his work in our soul.

Notice again the language in verse 4: “*Let perseverance finish its work in you...*”

The language is passive, not active.

Growing into maturity is less something we do, and more something we let God do *to us* through trials. Our part is to not give up and to let God have his way in us.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade, the seventh-century French Jesuit and spiritual master, put it this way:

Would to God that ... all men could know how very easy it would be for them to arrive at a high degree of sanctity [maturity]. They would only have to fulfill the simple duties of Christianity and of their state of life; to embrace with submission the crosses belonging to that state, and to submit with faith and love to the designs of Providence ...

The passive part of sanctity is still more easy since it only consists in accepting that which we very often have no power to prevent, and in suffering lovingly, that is to say, with sweetness and consolation, those things that too often cause weariness and disgust. Once more, I repeat, in this consists sanctity.²¹

How do we grow to maturity?

By “suffering lovingly.”

As I see it, the primary effect of suffering on our spiritual formation is to set us free from our attachments. By attachments, I mean the things we *think* we need to live a happy life. What Thomas Keating called our “emotional programs for happiness.” What my Calvinist friends call our “idols.”

Suffering has a way of not only revealing our attachments, but of stripping

them away and setting us free. For example, if our happiness is attached to our job, or our income, or our health, or our relationship status, when *any* of that is stripped away, it's emotionally excruciating. A kind of psycho-spiritual torture. But if we release the illusion of control and consent to God's work through our grief and loss, *we are set free*.

Because our attachments are what hold us back from life in God. This is why Jesus said it's so hard for the rich and happy to enter the kingdom. Not because wealth and a happy life are bad – they aren't. But because very few of us can live with them and not *need* them. These gifts so quickly become our gods.

As the psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May summarized it: “We want to be free, compassionate, and happy, but in the face of our attachments we are clinging, grasping, and fearfully self-absorbed. This is the root of our trouble.”²²

Attachments really are that – the *root* of our trouble. The source of our fear, which in turn, sabotages the flow of trinitarian love through us to others, rising up from the depths of our being where our life is “hidden with Christ in God.”²³

This historic moment – right here and now – is rife with potential to set us free from our attachments. But for that to happen, we have to consent to the work of the Spirit in us.

There's no right way to do this, per se. For me, it was as simple as carving out a few hours to articulate in writing what I sense the Spirit of God is trying to deepen and develop in me through this season.

I put six things in my journal:

1. Emotional resilience as a leader

2. Holy uncertainty (the capacity to live with little emotional need for control of outcomes)
3. Purity of motivation for ministry, not ego, but love
4. Freedom from the fear of other peoples' disapproval and criticism of me
5. Hopefulness
6. Contentment in the here and now

I'm sure there's more that God is trying to do that I'm unaware of, but if I were to come out of this pandemic with a new emotional resilience, an ease and peace when things don't go as planned, a motivation of love for all I do, full of hope and content with what *is* ...

That would be far more *gain* than *loss* in my life.

I would have no other choice other than to count it up and look at the bottom line: pure joy.

To turn it around, what is God trying to do *in you*?

Where is God calling you up to a new level of maturity?

What attachments is God revealing in your heart?

What are you losing? What could you gain in its place?

Can you identify what God is trying to work in your soul?

Can you give God not just consent, but cooperation?

Take a moment right now and see if you can identify God's invitations.

If you want, write a few of them out.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Now, let's step back and list the three invitations that James has for *all* of us.

1. Consider it pure joy.

Or better said: Rethink the last year and reframe your pain and suffering as “pure joy.” As an incredible opportunity to let God mature you.

2. Let perseverance finish its work.

Meaning, don't quit, don't give up. Don't escape into Netflix. Don't numb yourself with alcohol or your cultural narcotic of choice. Don't file for divorce or leave your church or stop reading your Bible or walk away from the faith.

Persevere. In following Jesus. In suffering lovingly.

3. Stay together.

Stay with your church, especially with your closest siblings in the family of God. Live in a thick web of interdependent relationships. Quietly defy the individualism that is wreaking havoc across the West. Surrender your autonomy to love. Place yourself in the constraint of community, for it is there we are set free. Give up your preferences for the sake of others. Enroll in the school of *agape*. When you fail a course, throw yourself upon God's mercy. Come back to the table, eat the bread, drink the wine, ingest the forgiving love of God. Repent. Repent again. And again. Risk vulnerability. We *will* get hurt, and we *will* hurt in return; that's part of facing grace. Our

greatest wounds come from relationships, but so does our deepest healing. The risk is worth it.

To end, this stuff is easy to write and very hard to live. This little book is as much for me as it is for you. Be gentle with yourself. Again, God is.

Here's one last thought: James' call to persevere with joy under trial is based on our apprenticeship to his older brother, Jesus, who did the same *for us* in love.

Listen to this passage from Hebrews 12, where the author uses the same Greek word as James, *hypomone* (the word for *perseverance*):

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with *perseverance* [*hypomone*] the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he *endured* [*hypomone*] the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who *endured* [*hypomone*] such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart ... *Endure* [*hypomone*] hardship as discipline ... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.²⁴

Different author, same call: persevere, endure, don't give up. And do it together. There's joy to be had in times of suffering and pain.

But the writer of Hebrews adds a new motivation: *because Jesus has already endured hardship for us*. He endured controversy and rejection and slander and persecution and, finally, arrest and imprisonment on false

charges, and a corrupt court with a rigged jury and torture and humiliation and in the end, the pain of death by crucifixion.

All for the “joy” that was set before him.

What is the “joy” that Hebrews is referring to?

It’s not perfectly clear. It could be to do the will of his Father. That’s beautiful. It means living in surrender to God’s loving wisdom is the path to joy. But many scholars interpret the “joy set before him” to be *us*. If that’s the correct interpretation, then James is saying that Jesus persevered through the pain of the cross for the joy of life with us. Therefore – see the logic here – we are to persevere through our times of pain and suffering for the joy set before us.

And what is our joy?

It’s him.

It’s always been him.

In the coming season, may you find his joy. May you find that deep center where your spirit touches his Spirit. May you make your home there through abiding prayer. May you touch his joy, and may it spread through your body to the world, as a healing cure for what ails a suffering humanity.

Endnotes

- 1.** That stat is from my home state of Oregon. See <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/BirthDeathCertificates/VitalStatistics/death/Pages/index.aspx>.
- 2.** *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin (New York: Dial Press, 1963).
- 3.** If you're curious about the difference, I'd recommend you read *Why Emotions Matter* by my friends Tristen and Jonathan Collins, with Melissa Binder (Beaumont Press, 2019).
- 4.** See "Growth After Trauma" by Lorna Collier (November 2016). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/11/growth-trauma>
- 5.** James 1v1-4.
- 6.** Acts 8v1-4.
- 7.** John 15v11.
- 8.** Bono said that in an interview about making a record full of hope in time of so much despair. "U2 Offers 'Songs of Experience' to a World That's on Fire," *New York Times* by Jon Pareles (September 6, 2017). <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/arts/music/u2-songs-of-experience-interview.html>
- 9.** *Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry* by Thomas Szasz (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 82.
- 10.** Job 5v7.
- 11.** John 16v33.
- 12.** From the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* edited by Johannes P. Louw (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988).
- 13.** See the helpful work of Matthew Bates in *Gospel Allegiance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019).
- 14.** Also from the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* edited by Johannes P. Louw.
- 15.** Of course, we must clarify what our hope is *in*. To just say "Jesus" risks us importing our own ideas or wishful thinking into Jesus' actual promises. When I teach on hope, I sketch a biblical theology of hope in four contours. Our hope is that (1) Jesus will return to end all suffering and renew all creation. In the meantime, (2) Jesus is with us, and (3) will utilize our suffering to form us into people of agape who have the character and capacity to co-rule with him in the future world, and (4) Jesus will bring forward good from the age to come into the pain and suffering of this present age. While it's only a taste of what's coming, it's still a gift.

16. This line comes from Friedrich Nietzsche, but was popularized by Eugene Peterson in his book by the same name.

17. See Robert Stolorow's interview in *Psychology Today* (February 6, 2016).
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rethinking-mental-health/201602/robert-stolorow-emotional-trauma-and-psychology-analysis>

18. See James Pennebaker's book *Opening Up by Writing It Down* (New York: Guilford Press, 2016S).

19. *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* by Timothy Keller (New York: Riverhead, 2013).

20. I say this with genuine humility, but I consider it one of the great false teachings of our time.

21. *Abandonment to Divine Providence* by Jean-Pierre de Caussade. I'm using the English translation published by Sublime Books in 2015.

22. *The Dark Night of the Soul* by Gerald May (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

23. Colossians 3v3.

24. Hebrews 12v1-3, 7, 11.

◉ THANKS FOR READING

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