

The Hardest Thing in the World

James 1:1-4

February 4, 2007

Have you ever felt like you'd been body slammed by life? I remember Christmas vacation of my sophomore year in high school. For some reason, the wrestling coach decided that we needed to practice. We practiced for 3 or 4 days of that vacation, and I showed up at every one. Not all of my teammates were so dedicated.

One day, there wasn't anybody there for me to practice against. All of the underclassmen and the guys in my weight class hadn't come. So I was teamed up with a senior heavyweight. This guy ran me ragged and beat me up one side of the mat and down the other.

I remember at one point, he was holding me chest height and parallel to the floor. I saw my young life flash before my eyes and can still hear the coach yelling from across the gym: "Don't hurt him!"

One of the things you don't know about me is that I used to be a state certified EMT. Passed the state test and everything. Still have the patch for my jacket somewhere. In my second senior year of college, I got a call from a high school classmate. Fort Wayne had just begun putting ambulances in service which were staffed by Emergency Medical Technicians or EMT's. My friend called me up and asked me what I was doing and had I ever thought about becoming one?

So I did the EMT thing for several hours each Saturday morning for a number of months. Learned all the blood and guts stuff. Our teacher was a former army medic who had done a tour of Vietnam, and didn't spare us any gory details. Watching the films on Saturday morning without having eaten breakfast just about did me in.

I think I've told you all about this before. Back in the mid-nineties, I started having trouble swallowing. It turned out that I had a disease called Achalasia, which means that the muscles in my esophagus didn't work to move the food down into my stomach. I lost about 35 pounds, and the doctors in Elkhart didn't seem to be able to help. So I headed up to Mayo Clinic on December 16, 1996 for a three-day stay: diagnose the first day, treat the second day, and be dismissed the third day. The problem was; they ruptured my esophagus. I had Christmas dinner pumped through a tube in my chest. The next spring, I buried Sara Greenwood. Sara was a pastor's widow and a member of the church I was serving at the time. She found a malignant melanoma on her leg, but ignored it too long. The cancer metastasized and killed her.

A couple weeks after her funeral, I found a malignant melanoma on my back. The doctor said that it was just on the borderline between OK and potentially dangerous. The good news is that the only lasting effect I have is a seven-inch scar.

When people ask me if I have ever had struggles and challenges in my life, I tell them, “Yeah, I know what hardship is like. I was a wrestler in high school who used to get beat up all the time, had a ruptured esophagus, a cancer scare...and, o yeah, at eight o’clock in the morning on an empty stomach, I’ve watched movies of babies being born.

But just when I start to think about how bad I have it, I come around to my senses. Because of my calling, I have entered into the lives of many people over the years that have faced situations that I would find unbearable. I have buried stillborn and elementary-aged children. I have sat with families when they have waited at the bedside for the impending death of a parent. I have sat in living rooms of people who have lost jobs and livelihoods. I have counseled couples in the midst of marital breakup. I have talked with spouses of alcoholic partners whose behavior is tearing the family apart. Members of the churches I have served have had aggressive forms of cancer, heart disease, strokes, and Alzheimer’s disease.

In my honest moments, I realize that I don’t have it tough at all. My life, in contrast to so many others, has been a cakewalk.

James wrote a letter to early Christians that was really more of a sermon than a correspondence. One of the frustrating things for me about biblical interpretation is that there is often such a wide difference of opinion by scholars. Some scholars insist that this James was the brother of our Lord. Others are just as adamant that the Greek prose is too elegant for a Galilean peasant. Some scholars believe that this is one of the earliest writings in the New Testament, while others think that it may not have been written until perhaps the middle of the second century. It speaks to “the twelve tribes in the dispersion” which could possibly mean Jewish Christians outside of Palestine. It could also mean the spiritual heirs of Israel who have moved away from their faith.

For me, what is really important is the content of this document. In it, James makes clear his concern for right behavior by those who claim Jesus as Lord. In addition to the ethical teachings, he shows great concern for persevering through trials and temptations. This is really where I want to go today. Obviously the people to whom he was writing were facing difficult times, perhaps even open persecution because of their faith. And so he begins his correspondence with these words.

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way (1:2-4).

I can think of nothing harder than to consider cancer a gift, or Alzheimer’s, or creeping old age, or domestic violence, or poverty, or divorce, or broken homes, or teenage pregnancy, or loss of a job, or any of the myriad of other tragedies that stalk human beings. I think about all of the ways that people in the churches I have served have been

body-slammed by life, and I wonder if James's elevator was all the way to the top floor. What in the world was he thinking?

All of this talk about suffering as a gift flies in the face of the present-day, hedonistic culture in which we live. We will go out of our way to avoid suffering of any kind. We assume, incorrectly, that true and strong faith is safe, secure, and free of trials and testing. James, however, teaches us the exact opposite. He tells us that faith only becomes mature when it has experienced and survived suffering.

James is talking about a different reality. The reality in which we live teaches us that suffering is bad. But true reality is defined by God and not by us. And God's reality says that any faith that counts, is a faith that has met, been challenged by, and conquered trials and suffering.

In 1960, Martin Luther King was interviewed by "The Christian Century" magazine. He said this:

Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been arrested five times and put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing...I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life...

As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue...I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.

There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block...but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation...The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before, I am convinced of the reality of a personal God.

There it is. There is indeed a thing such as redemptive suffering. When suffering comes, we can either become angry and bitter, or we can use that suffering to drive us to our knees and into the arms of a loving God. As James says, "Get down on your knees before the Master. It's the only way you'll get on your feet (4:10).

Mother Teresa said, "Suffering – pain, humiliation, sickness and failure – is but a kiss of Jesus" (Words to Love By. 1983. Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, Indiana).

The hardest thing in the world to do is to decide to continue on even through the trials of life. When Martin Luther stood before the Emperor charged with heresy, he was asked if he would repudiate his written books. His response has gone down in history as a great statement of confidence. "...my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." The hardest thing he would do was to continue on even though his very life was being threatened. But he trusted God more than he feared human beings.

The hardest thing in the world to do is to decide to continue on even through the trials of life. I have told you before how much I appreciate the prophet Jeremiah. He was called by God to be a prophet in the midst of incredibly difficult circumstances. He began his prophetic career believing that he didn't have the right stuff, and things just went downhill from there. He was beaten, imprisoned, threatened with death, and even deported to another country. All the while he threatened to quit, but each passing crisis drove him deeper into the care of God. He trusted God more than he feared those external threats.

If you were to ask me how I have suffered in this life and what gives me the right to tell others how to survive their suffering, I would admit that despite what I tell my children, I really haven't had it very rough. My piddly little aches and pains don't even come close to comparing to the real illnesses I see around me every day. But I am not asking you to believe me this morning. I am asking you to believe James as he reports the Word of God as he received it.

Suffering, trials, and temptations are gifts that I can live without. The hardest thing in the world has got to be finding joy in suffering, yet James tells us that we really can't live without it. At least, we can't have a fully developed, healthy, and mature faith without it.

James is calling us to see sufferings in the light of God's reality, not human reality. Through them, we are being prepared for greater faith and helped along the path to spiritual maturity. There is redemption in suffering, but only if we trust God enough to receive it.