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James

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Max Lucado talks about a potter explaining that, "When a potter bakes a pot, they check its solidity by pulling it out of the oven and thumping it. If it "sings," it's ready. If it "thuds," it's placed back in the oven. The character of a person is also checked by thumping. Been thumped lately? Late-night phone call. Grouchy teacher. Burnt meals. Flat tires. You've-got-to-be-kidding deadlines. Those are thumps. Thumps are those irritating inconveniences that trigger the worst in us. They catch us off guard. Flatfooted. They aren't big enough to be crises, but if you get enough of them, watch out! Traffic jams. Long lines. Empty mailboxes. Dirty clothes on the floor . . . Thump. Thump. Thump."

When was the last time you were thankful for a thump or a major trial in your life? Maybe during a difficult season at work, whether a job loss, a difficult boss, or burnout. Or financial pressures such as unexpected expenses, or having to make sacrifices. Maybe a strained relationship with a family member or friend. Parenting challenges or a season of singleness or loneliness. Maybe a major life transition of moving, retirement, or becoming an empty nester. A disappointment when you prayed for something that

didn't happen or a dream that fell through. A failure or mistake. A diagnosis you didn't see coming. A medical issue that has changed how you can function in this world.

Many of the New Testaments letter writers express appreciation to their readers or a blessing to God for His provision at the beginning of their letters, but not with James, he goes right into exhortation, first talking of trials, possibly suggesting that the tough times the believers were facing was the main reason he was writing to them. Trials are not something we often see as a blessing. As something to be thankful for. Jesus said in John 16:33 "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" While trials are a guarantee in this world, how we respond is not, and James is concerned with how we respond to them. One of the commentaries on James said, "Trials are to be seen overall as a ground for rejoicing since vital faith is required by God, and trials serve as its stimulus."

And what you will often notice is the little thumps reveal what the big trials will eventually expose. Do you rejoice through your trials? I don't know about you, but it's not typically my first reaction, however, trials often continue to encourage my dependence on God, leading to greater worship and faith in him. And

this is what James begins his letter with.

James 1:2 "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,"

James probably knows it's difficult to change how you feel about something, so maybe that's why he doesn't say to "feel joyful", but instead says to "consider it nothing but joy" or to "count it all joy." James is saying, consider what we know to be true about God and rejoice in the fact that God is doing something good in the midst of our heartache. James isn't asking you to call evil good. He's asking you to recognize that God can bring good out of what is genuinely painful. Christian joy isn't pretending the trial doesn't hurt. It's trusting that the trial doesn't have the final word.

James isn't asking us to assume that every painful thing that happens is directly caused by God. But he does assure us that no trial is beyond God's ability to redeem and use for our formation. He is reminding us that when we face challenges or thumps in our life, they are not signs that God has abandoned us. No they are reminders. They are reminders that God is working within us. Our trials are to be seen like tools in God's hands, crafting patience, endurance, and a steadfast spirit.

Think to the story of Job in the Old Testament.

Job, described as righteous and deeply devoted to

God. Blessed with a large family, wealth and a good reputation. He regularly worshipped God and prayed for his family. Satan challenges God, arguing that Job is faithful only because his life is comfortable. So God allows Satan to test Job. Everything is taken away, his livestock, servants, and, most painfully, his children. He is afflicted with severe physical suffering. Job struggles, but wouldn't we all? He grieves deeply and repeatedly, asking God why it is happening, which he never receives the explanation that we hear at the beginning of the story. When God finally speaks, God responds, not by explaining why, but by reminding Job of His wisdom, His power and His authority over creation that Job doesn't have. Job's story teaches us that not every trial has an obvious reason that we'll eventually discover, but that we can trust God even when we don't understand. Job is allowed to question, grieve, and wrestle with God without pretending everything is okay. Sometimes faith doesn't mean getting an answer. Sometimes faith means trusting the character of God when you don't get an explanation.

"Have YOU ever gone through a trial that you couldn't understand at the time, but later saw what God was doing in you throughout it?"

Or think of Horatio Spafford, who I have talked about before, the modern day Job. He was a very successful businessman and devout Christian. His entire fortune,

in real estate, evaporated in the Chicago Fire of 1871, shortly after he lost his son. Wanting a rest after all that, he booked a time for him, his wife, and four daughters to head on a boat over to Europe, but last minute business forced him to stay behind. The boat was struck, killing his four daughters, only leaving his wife. Shortly after he wrote the hymn, It is Well. And while he later had a daughter, his next son he lost to scarlet fever. He had many trials throughout his life that tested his faith, and yet this didn't stop his joy. Spafford experienced devastating loss, yet his faith allowed him to say, "It is well with my soul," not because everything was well, but because Christ remained faithful.

James isn't suggesting that you are to have nothing but joy, but his use of joy is the pure joy that is complete and unalloyed. He's not suggesting that we cannot have any other response other than joy. James isn't saying that we can't be saddened by our difficulties, but that trials are an occasion for genuine rejoicing. Why? Because as it says in James 1:3–4 "because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."

And this isn't something that only James says. Paul and Peter both speak with encouragement to early Christians on enduring through suffering. We hear

from Paul in Romans 5:3–4 “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,” And from Peter in 1 Peter 1:6–7 “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” As one commentary states, “The ‘testing of faith’ here is not intended to determine whether a person has faith or not; it is intended to purify faith that already exists.”

Don’t ever forget, you never do this alone. Jesus, ran his race with perfect steadfastness and endurance. Hebrews 12:2 “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus isn't merely an example of someone who endured hardship. He's the source and object of our endurance. James tells us to look at our trials differently. Hebrews tells us where to look when the trial comes: look to Jesus. We don't endure because we're strong enough. We endure because our eyes are fixed on the One who endured the cross for us.

James continues, James 1:5–8 “If any of you is lacking

in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord." or I love how the passion translation says the first couple verses, "And if anyone longs to be wise, ask God for wisdom and he will give it! He won't see your lack of wisdom as an opportunity to scold you over your failures but he will overwhelm your failures with his generous grace."

He will overwhelm your failures with his generous grace. We hear the word failures and we often shutter. I don't know what changes as we get older, but we often stop asking for help and stop asking questions, and we start to fear failure even more. Think to some of the younger children you have had in your life. There's often constant questions, asking for help to do things because they know you are going to help. And somewhere along the line we become more and more independent, and forget that we are dependent on God. James reminds us that we are to come freely to God. God gives his wisdom generously, he doesn't hold back his help or judge us for needing it. He invites us to ask in faith and promises that he will meet us in our uncertainty with the wisdom we need.

Wisdom isn't simply *"God, tell me why this happened."* It's, *"God, show me how to live faithfully in the middle of what I don't understand."* Maturity in the Christian life isn't becoming so independent that we no longer need God. It's becoming mature enough to know how desperately we need Him. How desperately do you recognize that you need God?

As James continues James 1:9–11 *"Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away."*

A common theme in James' is the contrast between the rich and the poor, and we will come back to this later on, here James reminds us what true wealth looks like. It's not about our possessions, about what we own, but by our relationship with God.

James 1:12 *"Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."*

Temptations come from within, not from God. It can begin with a sinful thought, which then becomes a sinful action, getting more destructive as we let it,

similar to a snowball, which gets bigger and bigger the more we let it roll down the hill. Endurance. Perseverance. Keep on running towards God, not away. Grow in your relationship with God, under the pressure, don't break.

James is not mainly contrasting people who believe in God with people who doesn't. Instead, he is contrasting active, trusting faith with faith that is mixed with doubt and doesn't lead to action. Everyone experiences doubt, especially when facing difficult circumstances. Doubt is normal. Biblical joy isn't dependent on whether life is going well. It comes from trusting God even during trials. Faith produces joy. Faith makes us open and willing to learn from God's wisdom. Faith isn't about having all the answers. God's wisdom helps us become more mature in our faith. Trials help us grow. The purpose isn't simply to "perform well" for God, but to become mature people who genuinely trust Him, spiritual maturity. James teaches that mature faith doesn't mean never having doubts; it means trusting God through our doubts and trials, allowing Him to use them to grow us in wisdom and maturity.

And as I said last week, James will often lay out two paths, which he does this morning. Both journeys start with a trial, but they diverge with our response. One who responds with endurance will walk a path which leads to life both here and in eternity. One who

responds with doubt and selfishness will walk a path which leads to destruction and ultimately death. James pleads to choose life. Jesus holds us fast in the middle of life's storms, an anchor that holds firm, our strength when our faith is weak. Ask yourself: How can I let times of difficulty strengthen my faith and draw me closer to him? We hear in Luke 6:45 Jesus says "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."

The thump doesn't create what's inside the pot. It reveals what's inside the pot. The traffic jam didn't make you impatient. It revealed the impatience that was already there. The difficult conversation didn't create your anger. It revealed something God still wants to heal. The disappointment didn't create your lack of trust. It revealed where you're still learning to trust Him.

So perhaps the question isn't whether the thumps are going to come. They will. James assumes it for he says, "whenever you face trials." The question is what God does in us when they come and what will be our response? Will we run from Him, or run toward Him? Will we demand an explanation, or ask for wisdom? Will we allow the trial to harden us, or will we allow God to use it to mature us?

The next time life thumps you, remember: the

thump isn't necessarily evidence that something has gone wrong. It may be an invitation to discover what God is forming in you. And when the world thumps you, may your life sing—not because the trial doesn't hurt, but because Christ is holding you in the middle of it.

So, will you sing, or will you thud?