

Consider it Pure Joy

James 1: 1-18



Preparation: *Pray before people arrive. Ask for the leading of the Holy Spirit in your conversation. Read the scripture for today, and study Stulac pg. 29-61. Circle or highlight the discussion prompts from this study guide that seem to fit your group best.*

Beginning the group study: Pray for the Spirit to be present with your group today.

Read aloud from James 1:1-18 (take turns, or assign a reader)

- What things stand out to you in the text from James?

From Stulac (pg. 29-30, 34-35) printed here:

“My friends Jim and Marie had devoted themselves to building what they had: a good income, a home in the country and two fine sons now grown into young men. Then came the tragedy: their older son, Jim Jr., had stopped to check the roadside mailbox near their country home, when a truck came over the hill and smashed into him. For Jim and Marie, it was the shattering of dreams. One son was dead, and the country home had become a place of sorrow rather than joy.

Soon there were additional trials. But a year later, as Jim was leaving my home one evening, he turned to me at the door and said, with a smile of puzzled but satisfied discovery, ‘You know, in the last year, I’ve lost my son, I’ve lost my job, and I’m making twenty thousand dollars less per year – and I’ve never been happier in my life.’

That’s an amazing statement, testifying to an amazing reality. But it was only the centuries-old testimony of Christian experience, expressed in terms of Jim’s particular circumstances. I was the family’s pastor, young and inexperienced. It was certainly not my skill or wisdom that had brought healing to Jim’s life. He spoke of a spiritual reality that does in fact lead a sufferer to joy in the midst of trials.

For Jim, the discovery of joy did not come by denial of his loss or by some superficial sentimentality. What had happened to him in the year since his son’s death was that he had committed his life to Jesus Christ. He had become what the apostle James, over nineteen hundred years before, had called ‘a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.’ James wrote about this with precisely the application my friend Jim discovered: that it is possible to ‘consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials.’

[James isn’t meaning happiness, because] happiness would be a weak term to use in place of *joy*. Happiness is a subjective state, whereas James is instructing us to make a more objective judgment when he says *consider it pure joy*. ‘Happiness’ might encourage readers to expect a carefree life or a constantly cheerful mood. Neither of these is what James has in mind. He acknowledges the presence of extremely unhappy experiences in his readers’ lives. At the same time, and with no perception of any contradiction, James counsels these readers to rejoice during those very experiences of hardship.”¹

¹ Stulac, George M. 2010. *James*. IVP Academic.

Getting started:

- Discuss the similarities and differences of happiness and joy

James is writing to a group of Jewish people who have become Christians; and he addresses them as the people who are scattered among the nations. He's addressing them all at once, saying, "I know you are persecuted, I know you face various trials, I know you are suffering." Certainly among James's readers are people experiencing confusion, fear, sorrow, injustice, loneliness, poverty, sickness, loss of home and family members and livelihood.

- From Stulac: "Don't put off your life of faith until times get better. Right now, in the midst of your suffering, is the very time to be putting your servanthood toward Christ into practice."
How are you tempted to put off your life of faith until life gets better?

The primary focus of "trials" in the book of James is that of rejection. It is not that Christians are the only ones who have ever been persecuted. Nor is the letter intended to give comfort to Christians who suffer as a consequence of their own sin. When James writes about trials, he means hardships and sufferings that Christians encounter even as they are following Jesus – he has in mind the trials that come as a consequence of one's faith in Christ.

- Talk about trials that you have experienced.
- Look at other scripture: consider Matthew 5:11-12, Romans 5:3. Discuss how they relate to this text.
- Do you rely on God in a time of trial, or is this something with which you struggle?
- Talk about how perseverance may lead to maturity.
- Stulac points out (pg. 52-53) that the greatest danger in a trial is not the wrong done to us but the wrong that *we could do* during that trial. What temptations do you face or have you faced when facing a trial?

The way Christians respond to trials is crucial. James suggests that we can respond in one of two ways: out of evil desires (making the trial an occasion for temptation, leading to sin); or we can respond out of faith (making the trial an opportunity for testing instead of temptation, developing perseverance and ultimately, maturity).

1. During trials, what evil desires arise in you? Repent of it, confessing that the temptation comes from your own evil desire
2. Use gratitude as a way to "consider the trial pure joy." Thank God in advance--not for the temptation, but for the good gifts that God will bring from the testing.
3. How can we oppose the injustice and try to change the circumstances of the trials of others around us?

Although we may face trials, we have a hope and joy in Jesus – we don't go alone.