

Chapter 1

Everybody Hurts

James 1:1-12

At the age of 27, Aron Ralston loved rock-climbing. He didn't just love it; he was good at it. One day in April of 2003, he set out for a routine climb. He didn't bother to tell any of his friends where he would be climbing that day; he just threw his supplies into his truck and headed for the site. As he was climbing, he reached a boulder that had become wedged into a tight mountain crevice. When he crossed the 800 pound boulder, it suddenly moved, pinning his right hand against a rock wall. In his book *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Aron vividly describes the moment he realized there was no easy way to escape. The boulder had trapped him in a desolate area more than 8 miles from his truck. He eventually *amputated his right arm with a pocket knife* in order to free himself. For Aron, the pain of cutting his arm was terrible, but it was worth it to preserve his life. Sometimes life is like that – in order for something good to happen, we have to experience pain.

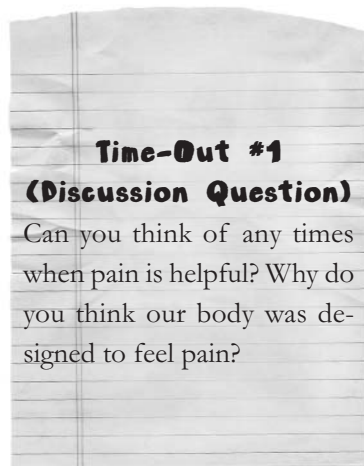
It doesn't matter who you are, where you live, or how much money you make – you are going to hurt. Somewhere along the way, a friend is going to turn his back on you, a family member will suddenly become ill, the person you planned to marry will say you aren't the one, and you will be dealing with serious pain. No one gets to live a pain-free life. You can't make enough money to avoid pain; if you could, no millionaire would ever file for bankruptcy. You can't gain enough popularity to avoid pain; if you could, then no movie star or pop singer would ever develop a drug addiction or eating disorder. You can't build up enough muscle to avoid pain; if you could, then no professional athlete would ever get caught up in a scandal or dragged into court. The bottom line is we are all going to hurt. Here is the important question: how will we handle it?

Pain Is...Good?

Have you read about all those people in the Bible who had leprosy? Found several times in the Bible, the term “leprosy” refers to a terrible, incurable skin condition. The main condition is known as “Hansen’s Disease” today, and we have developed some effective ways to treat it. Those treatments were not available in Bible times, and a person would often not even realize he or she had leprosy until the disease was in an advanced stage. While there are several different symptoms of this skin disease, one is a loss of sensation in the skin. That means that a person with leprosy might not feel anything he or she touched.

Sounds great, right? No pain! You would never have to feel heat when you touched a plate that was too hot. You would never have to wear gloves when you made a snowball. You would never have to shout when someone stepped on your toe. Life would be great without pain, wouldn’t it? Actually, this characteristic is one of the worst symptoms of leprosy. When this numbness sets in, you can burn yourself without knowing it. You can cut yourself and begin bleeding profusely before it catches your eye. You can break bones or damage muscles without realizing it. When we hear horror stories about people with leprosy whose skin and appendages began to fall off, we know that this lack of sensation is partly to blame. If you feel no pain, you may not notice a serious problem with your body until it is too late.

So what does any of this have to do with James? James begins his letter with a discussion of pain and suffering. In fact, he dives right into that topic with the second verse of chapter one, telling his readers they should consider it a joy to experience trials. In other words, they should get excited about suffering. At first that doesn’t seem to make much sense. After all, if you saw someone who was excited because tragedy had struck his family, what would you think? Although it might sound strange at first, James gives us a clear explanation of why suffering should give us joy.



What Do You Get?

First of all, suffering develops perseverance. You've probably heard someone say, "Whatever doesn't kill you just makes you stronger." The first reason James tells us to rejoice is because the more we suffer, the more perseverance we'll develop. He writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (1:2). The word "perseverance" refers to the ability someone has to endure difficult times and stay faithful to God. To help us understand this term better, let's look at an example James uses. Later on in the book, James points to Job's perseverance, stating "As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:11).

James is reminding his readers of Job, a man who lived many years earlier and whose story is recorded in the Old Testament. Job displays incredible perseverance, because he was a good man who lost almost everything. His flocks and herds were killed, which meant more than just the death of a few animals. In Job's day, wealth was often measured by livestock, so Job lost a great deal of wealth. He lost all his children and began to experience painful sores all over his body. His wife told him to "curse God and die" and his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) told Job he was being punished for sins he had committed. When we read the book of Job, however, we find out that Job had not sinned. In fact, just the opposite is true; following God made Job one of Satan's targets.

The reason James mentions Job's story is because of its ending. If you read the conclusion of the book, God rewards Job, making him well and giving him more livestock and more children. At the end of his life, Job is wealthier than he was at the beginning. Job reminds us that all those who follow God will suffer, and sometimes it will be for no good reason. The only reason Job experienced all this tragedy is because Satan attacked him, believing that if Job lost all he had, he would turn his back on God. Of course, Job didn't know this. All he knew was that life was unfair. After all, he was a model believer. Why should he suffer? He was not always patient with God, but he stuck it out. He persevered. We aren't always going to understand every reason behind the trials we face, but we need to follow Job's example. Every trial gives us another chance to develop perseverance.

Think about it this way – picture the practice of weight-lifting. The actual act of lifting weights causes trauma (or stress) to the muscles. After the lifting is completed, the muscles react to that trauma by growing back larger and stronger. In a couple of days, when a person lifts weights again, the process repeats itself. Like a broken bone that grows back stronger once the fracture has healed, muscles become stronger only when they have experienced the stress of working hard.

Grow Up

Perseverance helps us become complete. James uses the word “perfect” in verse 4, but when he used the term, it meant something different than our modern definition. When we think of someone who is perfect, we picture an individual without any faults who never makes a mistake. That is not what James is saying. The biblical meaning of that term is “complete.” When someone has reached “perfection,” they have been completed. James isn’t telling us that perseverance will make us into Super-Christians that never make mistakes; he is letting us know that if we want to become “complete” people who have everything we need, we must develop perse-

Time-Out #2 (Activity)

Watch your teacher (or a volunteer) try to lift a heavy weight. How did that person do? Was he/she able to lift it quite a few times?

Imagine you had never lifted a weight in your life, and you walked up to a 500 pound barbell and tried to lift it. What would happen? The only way to lift a weight that heavy is to train your muscles. In the same way, the difficulties we face in life are preparation for us. This year’s problems help us develop the perseverance we will need for next year’s challenges. Imagine living for years without experiencing pain and then being hit with a terrible tragedy, completely unprepared. It would be a little bit like trying to lift that 500 pound weight when you have never worked out in your life. As He helps us, God is able to use the trials we face to prepare us to handle tests further down the road. Our challenges will often be unfair, and they won’t make any sense to us. Our job is to persevere – to trust in God no matter what. One day, when we face an overwhelming challenge, we will be thankful that God helped us develop perseverance.

Time-Out #3 (Discussion)

Can you think of a painful experience in your life that helped you handle another challenge down the road?

words of my mouth.” Verse 7 goes on to say, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.” In fact, that entire book is filled with wise sayings for Christian living. Our entire lives should be spent in an effort to get more wisdom.

James does tell us a specific way to approach God in prayer – with faith and without doubting. The writer of Hebrews describes faith as being certain of what is hoped for and sure of what is not seen (11:1). Prayer really is an exercise of faith; we cannot see God, yet we should make sure when praying that we are sure of what we do not see. James also calls us to ask without doubting, which can often be difficult, since we all struggle with doubt from time to time. When we find ourselves questioning God’s power, we do feel like a “wave of the sea, driven by the wind.” We don’t want to be that double-minded man James mentions, who asks God for blessings even though he doesn’t expect

verance. The word “mature” comes from this idea, too. Has anyone ever told you to “grow up!”? James is telling us that we can’t do that without perseverance.

But what if we aren’t complete? If we don’t have wisdom, James tells us we can ask God for it. Wisdom is one of the most important things we can ever obtain. The Old Testament book of Proverbs tells us repeatedly that we need to strive after wisdom. Proverbs 4:5 states, “Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the

Time-Out #4 (Discussion)

Read through the following Psalms of David: Psalm 13, Psalm 22. Does it comfort you to know that other biblical figures like David struggled with doubt? These psalms move from doubting-frustration to awed faithfulness. Repeating them to ourselves can help us move from doubt to trust. What passages of Scripture can you memorize and repeat to yourself when you are faced with doubts?

anything in return. But, we still have to admit that every Christian, at one point or another, struggles with doubt. This is a time when we truly know the power of God's Word, since the Bible shows us followers of God who struggled with doubt.

The Ultimate Headgear

Perseverance allows Christians to receive a "crown of life." Have you noticed how positive James has been throughout these verses? He's talked about difficult issues, using words like "trials" and "suffering," but he keeps saying things like "Consider it joy" and "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial." Have you ever noticed how two people can look at the same object and see totally different things? You and I might look at a tragedy as a terrible life experience, but James sees those times as joyful blessings. In verse 1, James reveals that he intends for this letter to go to Christians abroad, many of whom seem to be suffering for various reasons. In verse 9, James describes rich and poor people in a completely different way – he tells us that poor people have a high position, while rich people have a low position.

Jesus made similar statements when He walked the earth; He often found more faith with sinners and tax collectors than He did with the wealthy and influential teachers. For example, Mark 10:17-31 recalls a man who ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him, asking what he should do to gain eternal life. When Jesus lists the commandments from the Law of Moses, the man claims to have kept those since he was a boy. This man (often referred to as the "Rich Young Ruler," based on this passage and similar ones in Matthew and Luke) seems to have a high position. After all, he has kept all the commandments. He was willing to run up to Jesus and kneel at His feet, a display which was certainly embarrassing for a prestigious man. When Jesus asked him to give up those riches, however, that man could not part with his wealth. Jesus responded by saying it was hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of Heaven (vss. 24, 25). Jesus' statement shocked His followers, since many people viewed riches as a sign of God's blessings. In other words, the richer you were, the more blessed by God you were. If you were blessed greatly, you must be a good person.

Both Jesus and James tell us something different, though. Jesus concludes His discussion by stating, "Many who are first will be last, and the last, first." James paints the same picture in verses 10 and 11, depicting rich men who pass

away in the middle of their pursuit of wealth. Just as Jesus said the kingdom is only accessible if we give up the idol of wealth, James tells us that the crown of life is available only when we have persevered under trial. Our trials will be different than those faced by James' original readers, but the source of our perseverance remains the same.

Time-Out #5 (Discussion)

Bring in a glass of water, and fill it up halfway. Ask the age-old question – is the glass half-full or half-empty? Also, consider the famous visual illusion popularized by British cartoonist W.E. Hill. (Do an internet search for “visual illusion W.E. Hill.”) Do you see a young woman or an old lady? Depending on which one you look for, your perspective changes. The same is true when we handle tragedy; what we look for determines how we view what happens to us.

Putting It All Together

1. How does James view trials? Are there ways his view of trials can help us live more fulfilling lives?
2. What three things do we gain by persevering? Can you think of some biblical examples of perseverance?
3. Have you thought of a quality you lack for which you can begin praying?
4. In what ways does our culture promote the pursuit of wealth rather than perseverance? Brainstorm specific examples.
5. Make a brief list of the trials Christians face today. In what ways are the trials we experience different than the ones James would have known? How are they similar?

Taking It Home

This week, keep a piece of paper in your pocket as you go to school, practice, Bible class, etc. Write down the different challenges you face on a daily basis. Pray for strength to handle those difficulties, and try to think of ways you can learn from them.