

August 16, 2026

The Letter of James

I. Count It All Joy

James 1:1-12

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

He had not always been sick. A tall, rangy Texan, he was the descendent of German immigrants, that second great wave of settlers who came to Texas after the Civil War and farmed and built up the land. A child of the Depression, he flew the “Hump” in World War II – the “aluminum trail” he called it, because of all the wrecked planes – taking supplies over the Himalayas to the Allied forces in Burma. He loved Glenn Miller and all the big bands, and was an enthusiastic and graceful dancer.

He traveled some after the war, finally settling down in Houston, working for a large corporation and living a full and active life. In 1959, he was offered a big promotion that would have taken him to New York; but he turned it down. Instead, he and his wife decided to move with their two boys out to the country. They built a house on land that had been in his family for a long time. He was a good provider, a man who did for himself, one unafraid to assume responsibility; a proud man, capable and wise.

Then, in 1968, he inexplicably began falling from time to time. He also lost some of his hearing. His body just seemed to be turning against him, strangely rebelling against even his simplest command. It was MS, multiple sclerosis. A cane was soon followed by crutches; the crutches, in time, by a wheelchair; and then, last, an electric wheelchair. The daily humiliations he had to endure were endless. He could no longer dress himself; he needed a lift to get into and out of bed; he required a special chair to take a shower. He became what we have taught ourselves not to say, but which the Bible does not hesitate to name: he became lame.

In those declining days, his business was pecans – wholesale and retail. If you wanted to sell the pecans you had picked up out of your yard, he would buy them from you at so much a pound. If you wanted them cracked, he would do that, too. After he had collected enough, he would bag them and sell them to the shellers and the big warehouses. He was good at this and, even in a wheelchair, he made his business profitable.

If you ever came in to do business with him, he would, after exchanging pleasantries with you, always look you right in the eyes and assert – no matter what the weather was like or what either of you might feel like – *“It’s a beautiful day.”* You might say in reply, *“But it’s raining, or icy, or as hot as Texas in July.”* Still he would smile at you from his wheelchair and say it again: *“Yes, but it’s a beautiful day.”*

Now pecans, before they are loaded up and moved, are usually stored in large burlap bags, bags which can easily weigh upwards of one hundred pounds when filled. When one of these bags is filled, its top must be stitched together with twine. Sometimes this work would be left to a hired hand to do, or occasionally one of his sons or even his wife would do it. But most often he would hire one of the young teenage boys in the church for this task as an after-school job. Around 4:00 every afternoon, the twelve or thirteen-year-old would come in, put his books down, finish off a snack that had been prepared just for him, and then get down to the business of sewing. Kids who wouldn't even rake leaves at home would hurry over to his place to sew burlap bags before his watchful eyes.

That was part of his secret. Children loved him and trusted him implicitly, even quite small children. He would talk to them, ask about their school or teachers, tease them about their girlfriends or boyfriends. Sometimes children are intimidated by the lame; a wheelchair can be a frightening object to a child. But they loved him. He knew, or at least could still remember, what it was like to be a kid: to want to go fishing on a hot day or see how fast something could go. And not only that, children trusted him because they saw him at church every Sunday, saw him worshipping, sitting in his wheelchair in his usual place against the back wall. He knew what it was like to have to be still for a long time, and for the children that made him a comrade-in-arms in a way. And after church, they would not hesitate to hug him or sit in his lap or help push him in his chair.

Two generations of young men in that church grew up stitching bags of pecans with him every fall and winter. And all of them did grow up. Some went to college; others did not. Some are businessmen now themselves. One is a farmer; another is a cook. The course of their own lives, like his, have not been uniformly smooth – but, rather, full of ups and downs and all the twists and turns of life. But they all share one thing in common: they have all come to realize as they have grown older that they had learned from him something more than just how to stitch up a bag of pecans. They had learned from him about how to live, about faith, and about hope.

Hope began for him in that wheelchair – not apart from that reality, but embedded in it. Every day it began with the vivid reminder that he could not do for himself – that he could not even stand up, that he couldn't by his own strength make things right. Every day began in defeat – the very place where faith and hope and love seem so often to begin. What happened to him, and in him, was that his life became a gift of God. In a way, it was terrible to behold. It included wheelchairs and medicines, frustration and weariness – all of which, for him, was a kind of dying. But he made a good death of it, every day. And every day he was raised by God to new life – to be alive for other people, to give his own remarkable gift of life to them. He lived for them. He hoped for them. His hope itself was a gift which taught children and young men, and everyone around him, how to hope with each stitch of a burlap sack, with each daily effort to work and live and love in a world that is not always easy. He, himself, became a gift of hope and of life and of faith to all who knew him.

At the end of his life, he could hardly use any body part on his own except for the index finger on his left hand, a small movement which enabled him to push the lever on his wheelchair. He could no longer do anything, which made him useless in the judgment of the world – but a parable of the Kingdom of God for the ones who had been and continued to be touched by his life.

For his hope was not in his own strength or power or skill. In the end, they had all failed him. His hope was in the divine love, which is steadfast and remains faithful even in the valley of the shadow. His hope was in the laughter of a God who has chosen even the foolish, useless things of this world to show forth His grace and power and holiness. His hope was in the mercy of the God whose goodness causes even the lame man to be able to leap for joy.

On a foggy, gray December day, six young men carried a simple wooden casket to its final resting place. They had all, at one time or another, stitched up bags of pecans and sat at the feet of the one they now carried – offering up this one last service to the one who had taught them so much about what it meant to a person of faith, a person of hope, a person of love. As the last words were said and the final prayer was offered, the sun's rays began to break through the clouds. The minister turned to one of the young men standing beside the grave and said, *"It looks like it will be a beautiful day after all, doesn't it?"* And the young man turned, looked him full in the eyes and smiled, and said, *"It is a beautiful day – already."*¹

* * * * *

I tell you that story because it is the best way I know to explain what James means when he tells us to *"Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds."* James does not mean that we should be joyful when bad things happen to us – cancer, hurray! Lost job – hurray! Nor does he mean that there is anything particularly joyful about going through our trials. Trials of various kinds – by which James means any and all sorts of bad things – trials are just that, trials. Things we don't want to have happen to us. Things which we go to great lengths to keep from happening to us. But bad things which, nonetheless, do happen to us in life – can happen to us all at any time in life. To be an imperfect human being among other imperfect human beings in a fallen and imperfect world is to know trials. That's just how it is – and none of it is joyful in and of itself.

No, what James means by counting it all joy is simply this: that by living through these trials in faith; by seeking out God, and the wisdom of God, in the midst of our trials – in this way our faith in God becomes deeper. In this way our capacity to stand up and take whatever life dishes out – through the power of our faith in God – becomes stronger. And in this way, and in this way alone, our lives become marked by the sort of steadfastness and resilience and fountain of goodness to others exemplified by the man in our story.

"Count it all joy," writes James – not because anything about our trials or going through our trials is, in and of itself, joyful. But because God can use our trials in a way He cannot use our happier experiences – God can use our trials to give us steadfastness, to give us resilience, to give us His joy. Joy, not happiness – that brief little burst of positive emotion we experience from time to time. Not happiness, but joy – His joy. Joy as the profound and deep and lasting assurance that we are ultimately safe in His hands, come what may. Joy as the confidence, born of experience, that in God's hands, all things really shall be brought round to good. Joy – that in His hands, all the trials we experience shall be given deeper meaning, shall find redemption. Indeed, joy is the steadfast resilience which comes from knowing that we shall always be redeemed:

*Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials
of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces*

steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing . . .

Blessed is the one who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

And it is only through such trials, undertaken in faith, that we can learn this steadfastness. Only through our trials can we ever learn truly to desire and deeply to receive God's gift of joy. For trials open us up to God, open us up to our need for God – open us up to our utter dependence upon God – in a way good times never can. Malcolm Muggeridge, in his memoir, speaks this truth from out of his own experience:

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness.²

But again: it isn't merely the fact that we go through trials that produces this steadfastness in us, that the deep assurance of joy take hold of us. It is going through our trials actively trusting in God, actively holding on to Him in the storm, actively calling upon Him, actively seeking and relying upon His gifts of strength and wisdom to get us through. That is what James is telling us when he writes: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting . . ."*

Let him or her ask in faith – that is how going through our trials produces steadfastness and the assurance of joy. But let us acknowledge this, that in the midst of our trials such active trusting in God, such active holding on to Him and calling upon Him, such active relying upon His wisdom and strength to get us through is not easy. It is much easier to allow our trials to separate us from God, to allow our trials to convince us that either God doesn't care or that God doesn't exist.

But if we will hold on – and that is indeed a choice we can make out of faith, a choice we must make in faith – if we will keep calling out, if we will keep trusting, if we will keep holding on to God, then it is that our faith in God becomes tested and tempered, and turns into steel. Solid, steadfast, resilient. Then it is that we come to know, with full confidence, that God will always prove sufficient for our every need. Then it is that steadfast becomes our faith, and joyful becomes our soul:

Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I began with a story, let me end with one. A theology professor tells of hiking with his children in the Banff National Park in the Canadian Rockies. They spent five days on the trail in that glorious natural setting. Along the way, he says, they began to take special notice of a certain kind of pine tree, the white bark pine, which dotted the landscape at the higher elevations, clinging to the rock cliffs. He writes:

*Each one was obviously weathered — trunks gnarled; limbs broken off; bark roughed up by wind, rain, sleet, and snow . . . clawlike roots gripping rocky slopes. These trees had passed the test of time and survived, sculpted by the elements into extraordinary works of art. They were truly beautiful — not beautiful like a child's innocent and delicate face, but beautiful like the carved and aged face of a lifelong fisherman or farmer. These trees were strong and seasoned, full of years and memory and character.*³

And then he adds this:

*Those trees symbolize what I believe God wants to accomplish in our lives, which is to work complete redemption. He wants to use the harsh conditions of life to shape us . . . into something extraordinarily beautiful.*⁴

And that is why James tells us – that is what James means when he tells us – to count it all joy. To count it all joy because: “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*”

¹ This story is taken, nearly verbatim, from Thomas W. Currie III, “A Wonderful Life,” Journal for Preachers, Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (Advent, 1995), pp. 10-13.

² Malcolm Muggeridge, Testimony, quoted in David Platt, Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in James (Brentwood, TN: Holman, 2014), p. 7.

³ Jerry Sittser, A Grace Revealed: How God Redeems the Story of Your Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p. 18.

⁴ Sittser, pp. 18-19.