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James 1:2-4, New Living Translation

² Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

Accused of Xenophobia: *Be warmed and filled.*

Several years ago, when my mother was still alive and I was a professor, I was teaching an information systems class at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and as always, I am changing details to protect someone's privacy. It was a graduate level class and one day, a woman from that class came to my office. I could tell that she was very angry about something the moment I looked up at her. She sat down across my desk. My door was wide open. She happened to be from France; we will call her Sophie. I asked her what I could do for her. She then proceeded in a very loud voice to tell me that I had given her a C on an exam because she was French. She said that her exam should have been worth an A, and that if I weren't such a Xenophobe, I would have given her the grade she deserved. She said that she had already filed a formal complaint against me. This was very scary news: any kind of complaint of bias by a student is taken more

than seriously. Universities are big on making sure that all students are happy at all times - and that nothing controversial can make its way into the media. I was extremely vulnerable - and I could feel my heart pounding in my throat. This was my problem to resolve, and to resolve very quickly. She then went on and on about how, whenever I looked at her, she could see my hatred for French people in my eyes, and she knew from the beginning of the semester that I had a bias against her because she was French.

Now, looking back, and putting things into perspective, this was simply one of those “very bad” days that we have in life, when something goes wrong, and we’re not sure just how nasty the situation will become. But in the moment, at times like this, it’s very hard to do what Christians try to do – and that is hand our worries off to God and then proceed with calm. I waited for Sophie to take a break from her tirade, and then, on impulse, I did something. Rather than debating her or defending myself, I picked up my phone and I called my mother. Now, my mother was French speaking; she grew up speaking French in school and at home. She identified heavily as being French. I spoke French as a small child but have forgotten most of it. In times of particular stress, however, if it is really, desperately needed, some of my French tends to come back to me. When my mother answered the phone, I said hello to her, in French, and I asked her how

she was doing. My mother said that it was very nice that I was once again practicing my French. I told her that I had a selfish reason for speaking in French, that there was someone in my office that I would like her to talk to. Of course, while I was talking to my mother on the phone, Sophie was sitting there with wide eyes. I told my mother that I had given a graduate student from France a C on an exam and that she was sitting in my office, very angry at me. I said that Sophie was under the impression that I had given her a C because I am biased against French people. I then gave the phone to Sophie - and I could hear my mother's voice being directed into Sophie's right ear.

I'd like to look at the Book of James, starting with the opening of the book, where the author introduces himself and offers a greeting to his readers. This is how it reads:

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the "twelve tribes"—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!

The author says that his name is James. Over the many centuries since this was written, people have argued about the identity of this James. Is it James, the brother of Jesus? We have waxed and waned on whether we think this is true, and there is today a renewed belief that indeed, Jesus' kid brother wrote this. This letter is largely directed at non-Gentile followers of Christ and is

representative of a flourishing early Jewish Christian church. In the ballpark of 50 to 150 A.D., it appeared there might be a major branch of the Jewish faith that would accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. But this fizzled out after this book was written. Note that James calls himself a “*slave of God*”. This was a common phrase for early Christians to use when identifying themselves. But - who was *this* James? First, the names James and Jacob are related in Hebrew, and come from the Hebrew name Yaakov, and this was a very common name at the time. The evangelist Paul refers to James, the brother of Jesus as an “*Apostle*”, and so this adds some credence to the idea that the Book of James was written by Jesus’ brother. It’s also recorded in Acts 15 that James was active in the Jerusalem Council, so Jesus’ brother was clearly influential in the early Jewish Christian church. But since the letter is written in very polished Greek, if Jesus’ brother did write it, he would have had to have gotten some help from a much more literate person. It’s highly unlikely that the son of a small village builder would have had the command of Greek necessary to write this document.

Perhaps the biggest oddity, if this was truly written by the brother of our Lord, is that there are only two direct references to Jesus Christ in the entire book – and one of them is in the greeting. Martin Luther had a low opinion of the book in general, and certainly did not think that the brother of Jesus wrote it. In truth, we

will almost certainly never know for sure if the younger brother of the son of God wrote the Book of James, but many modern scholars believe that he did write it.

Let's look at the content of the letter. This is verses 2-4 of Chapter 1:

² Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

I did not think of this verse when the young woman from Paris was accusing me - in a voice that I am sure was heard many doors down the hall - of being an anti-French xenophobe. If I had thought of this verse, maybe I would have been more relaxed as my mother spoke to this woman in French. Maybe I would have leaned on a key point of Christian theology. As believers, we know that we do not have to be rich, or healthy, or to have things go our way, to live with hope and joy. We can be anxiety-free when the poop hits the fan. As James tells us, we use adversity as an opportunity to strengthen our dependency on God, our trust that God will guide us through whatever happens to us. Our biggest source of joy comes from God, and the closer we are to God, the less likely we are to panic. Having faith, letting God walk with us every step in life, reassures us and gives us confidence that everything will be fine. This is, of course, hard to do in practice, especially in moments of unexpected chaos. My mother, whose name was

Annette Claire DuBois, spoke to this woman in a somewhat loud voice, but she wasn't screaming; he was simply being, shall we say, emphatic with Sophie. I could hear my mother say that she, my mother, was French herself. My mother said that her son did not hate his mother. She also wanted to know how Sophie came up with this bizarre form of racism – hating French people? Nobody in the United States, my mother told her, cared or knew if anyone was French. Perhaps her son also disliked English people or folks from Arizona. I'll get back to this.

Let's look at the next four verses, 5-8:

⁵ If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. ⁶ But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

James is very blunt. Our loyalty, our dedication should be fully directed toward God, not the world. We value our faith, not the physical things that we can gain in this world. If we're not trying to compromise, if God is indeed our first priority, then God will certainly be listening when we come before him. In that moment, with my nerves shaken and with me worried about getting a spooky phone call from someone in the administration, I did not embrace this message.

If we can turn to God during stressful times, and if we do it so often that it becomes reflex, our lives will become far more relaxed.

If you're wondering just what sorts of troubles James is referring to, we can't be sure from what he writes. But most likely he's speaking in general terms and referring to the normal trials that face any person in life, including those that impacted early Christians and impact us, such as being shunned because of our beliefs or being put down because Christians tend to be poor and to not have much political clout. But he is deliberately vague, so that we can read into what he is writing any sort of difficult challenge.

Next, verses 9 to 11 tell us this:

⁹ Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. ¹⁰ And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. ¹¹ The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

James is saying that there are two kinds of poverty. One involves money and it is radically less important than the one that involves faith. You are far wealthier if you have faith, if you sincerely emulate Jesus, than if you have a lot of money. The economy, the stock market, all those things that we cannot control have nothing to do with true wealth. We are entirely in control of how rich we are.

Further, if we are financially rich, then God has chosen to humble us, because the things that we have will fade, unlike faith. I very much like the end of our quote.

¹¹ The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

It doesn't matter at all how much money you have, how much the world has honored you, how much you are envied – the instant you die. In fact, while many people do not outlive their money and manage to pass on riches to their children, most wealthy people, as they age, do indeed outlive the joy that money gives them. When Sophie was threatening me with a formal complaint to the university, I should have remembered that the university cannot take my faith away from me. No human has that power.

My mother spoke to Sophie somewhat longer than I might have expected. But finally, my mother fell silent, and Sophie handed the phone over to me. I put it to my ear – and my mother had already hung up. I was about to say something along the lines of well, Sophie, I hope you realize now that I don't hate French people. But before I could speak, Sophie said: *"I'm sorry, I was wrong. I was just so sure that the answers on my exam were right that I was looking for a reason for you to not give me full credit. The problem is that I have been feeling like an outsider here in the U.S., and I was sensitive to being French, to having an accent,*

to acting different from my fellow students. I was insecure. I guess I deserve the C." Now, I would have preferred that she had yelled her apology as loudly as she had yelled her accusations of bigotry, so that folks down the hall could hear it, but I was satisfied. Before I could ask her to please withdraw her complaint against me, she said she would do so. I acted nonchalant, as if I wasn't too concerned about this. She did later do this, but indeed, others had heard her, and so the next day, more than one professor teased me about being an anti-French xenophobe. In the end, Sophie pulled her grade up and got such a high score on the class project and the final, that she got an A in the course.

There is another aspect to the Book of James. He doesn't just tell us that we need to have faith, that faith will get us through scary times. Indeed, James goes on to heavily focus on a faith that is backed up by real actions of compassion and empathy, of generosity and kindness. If we're going to turn to God, then our faith needs to be deep and real, and if it is, we will find ourselves living out our faith. This fits in with James' overall belief that we should be humble, that our faith should be enduring, and that we should value our faith above the treasures of this world. James suggests that if our actions do not reflect this sort of faith, then our faith is an illusion. Our faith isn't real. Consider this from James, from the second chapter now, verses 14–17:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

When we treat someone with generosity and warmth, when we see the world from their perspective and act on this, we are being Christian. I may at first have seen Sophie as not at all deserving of viewing herself as oppressed, but she was in an unfamiliar place, felt isolated, and was quite anxious about succeeding on her own in a very different world. I would have done a terrible job of being a grad student in France. When she scared the crap out of me, God was giving me a chance to strengthen my faith. I did tell her that I wasn't angry, that I now understood her situation, and that I was glad she had talked to me.

Let's jump from the beginning to near the end of James, Chapter 5:

¹³ Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. ¹⁴ Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.

This tells us something very important about turning something bad into something blessed. We don't have to sit around silently, praying to God and waiting in isolation for salvation. We should lean on fellow believers. That's why we belong to a church, why we are here every Sunday morning. That little thing

we do during each service where we share our joys and concerns, where we ask for prayers, is an extremely long-standing tradition that goes all the way back to the absolute earliest days of the Christian church. We ask each other for help. We are not embarrassed. We're not ashamed that somehow, something that's not good has happened to us. The first step toward finding joy in our troubles lies in turning to the other members of our faith family. Leaning on fellow believers gets us back on that path to joy, to knowing that God is in our life and is walking with us every step of the way.