

Jesu Juva

“Our Brother, the Messiah”

Text: James 1:1-12 (Matthew 13:54-58; Acts 15:12-22a)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds . . . Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial . . .

Thus wrote James, the brother - or half-brother - of Jesus. And we must admit, it is not usually how we think. Blessed, we think, is the man who *avoids* trials, who is free of troubles, who has a smooth and easy life. Blessed is the man with a good job, a faithful family, and well-behaved kids. Blessed is the man who has good health and is well-regarded in the community. That is what we want from God, what we often ask of God, and what we expect of God. To take care of His children, *especially* those like you and me, in church, trying our best.

But James, it seems, has a very different understanding of *blessed* than us. What we consider blessed doesn't last. ***Flowers pass away, beauty perishes, and the rich man fades away in the midst of his pursuits***, James says. And that is certainly true. What is here today may be gone tomorrow, including you and me. And even when we have all of those things, still there is something missing, for, James says, ***Count it all joy . . . 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.***

So without these trials, apparently, we are *lacking in something* - something we need, something that is our blessedness. And so when trials come from the hand of our Father in heaven, we can, as James says, ***count it all joy***, for we know that through them, our Lord is working in us what we need. That we may ***be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing***. That we ***receive the crown of life, which God promised to those who love Him***.

Now, perhaps you're thinking that you know that. Our world has even come up with sayings to this effect: *No pain, no gain . . . [and] What doesn't kill you makes you stronger . . .* and things like that. But I don't think that's what James is talking about here. That's the wisdom of the world. James is talking about another kind of wisdom - that comes only from above. For, he says, ***if any any of you lacks wisdom,***

- don't turn to the wisdom of the world - ***let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.***

So what is James trying to teach us here? What wisdom are we missing? What perspective does he have that we are lacking? The answer, I think, comes from who he is: the brother of our Lord. And as the brother of Jesus, you can be sure he went through a few trials and struggles *because of his brother*. The struggle of believing that his brother was who He said He was - the promised Messiah. The trial of being related to someone who says He is the Messiah, and the ridicule and scorn that probably came with that. And the struggle of watching his brother condemned and hung on a cross to die. It couldn't have been easy for James.

But then something happened: his brother, who died such an infamous and horrible death, rose from the dead! And that changed everything for James. So much so that he went from being a doubting and unbelieving skeptic of his brother, along with others in his family and hometown (Matthew), to being the head of the church in Jerusalem. The resurrection changed everything. For with the resurrection, it wasn't only Jesus who was resurrected from the dead, James was, too. From being dead in skepticism and doubt, to being alive in faith. To know and believe as unlikely as it may have seemed, his brother was more than just his brother - He was the Son of God in human flesh and blood, the Saviour of the world.

So James had been blessed. A miracle, I'm sure James would tell you. For it was certainly not his doing, nor was not worthy. And I'm sure that influenced him when the first church council took place in Jerusalem, which we heard about in the reading from Acts. For in his decision about whether or not the Gentiles could become members of the church without first becoming Jews and keeping the Law, he points to what changed everything for him: *the resurrection*. He points to the prophet Amos who said: ***After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.*** Those words, He came to realize, are talking about his brother. Jesus is *the tent of David* who was reduced to *ruins* on the cross for our sins, but *rebuilt* in the resurrection, to seek all people, that all may be restored to life from death. No matter how unworthy, whether from the remnant of Israel or from the Gentiles, what makes the difference is the resurrection. That and that alone changes everything . . . for James, for the Gentiles, and for you.

And that is the wisdom that comes down from above that's so different than the wisdom of the world. For if, to the world, *what doesn't kill you makes you stronger*, but with Jesus, **it's what kills you that makes you stronger**. For faith is not like an exercise program - faith is a death and resurrection program. Dying and rising with

Christ. That dying to sin, dying to doubt and skepticism, dying to our old sinful desires and passions, we may rise to a new life. That is what we are lacking, even if we are rich in the things of this world. But that you may be **perfect and complete and lacking in nothing**, Jesus comes and bids you die and rise with Him.

But dying is not something that comes naturally to us! We don't do it willingly and try to avoid it. And so our Lord, who wants only good for us, sends trials and struggles. Trials and struggles to kill our self-reliance, our pride, our chasing after the things of this world that do not last. To loosen our grip on the temporary, that we may cling to the eternal. That is why James could write, **Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds** - not because they are pleasant! But because Christ is working in them, to make you steadfast in faith and lacking in nothing. For to be steadfast in faith is to be steadfast in Christ, and to be steadfast in Christ is to be lacking in nothing. For no matter what you have or do not have in this world, no matter what comes and goes, you have in Christ and His resurrection **the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him**. For truly, Jesus is **the man who remained steadfast under trial**. Jesus is the man who won **the crown of life** not for Himself, but for you.

Now, that is quite a different way of thinking, you must admit! That our strength comes not from within us but from outside of us. That life comes from dying. That we gain by giving. That trials lead to joy and blessedness. But that is what the cross is all about. Dying to live. The Son of God, the God of life, dying for us who are dead in our trespasses and sins, that we may rise with Him in His resurrection and live a new life.

That's why baptism, that's why preaching Law and Gospel, that's why repentance and forgiveness, that's why the Body and Blood of our Lord - for here in these places is the blessed dying and rising of God *for you*. The power of God *for you*. The power of His forgiveness and the resurrection of Christ to a new life. Here *for you* over and over again. As often as you need it. For, as Luther once said, that old man, that old sinner in you, doesn't go down easy. And you know it. He is stubborn and doesn't want to die but indulge his sinful, selfish desires, and so he keeps coming back and he keeps dragging you down. And so we keep coming back. Here, for raising up. Here, for forgiveness. Here, because we can't make it on our own.

Because when it comes to life and death, there's only one of those you can do on our own. You can't give yourself life, but you can give yourself death. And we do, don't we? We've got lots of saying about that - we work ourselves to death, or drink ourselves to death, or worry ourselves to death, and there's probably lots more. But we never "do" ourselves to life, do we? We don't have any sayings like that. The closest I can think of is when we offer a toast and say: *Here's to life!* But even in

that there seems to be an acknowledgement that we're enjoying something here that will not last, that is fragile and passing away. And indeed it is.

And so Jesus came to do what we cannot do: life. For that is what we lack. The world is full of death - people die, animals die, relationships die, things die. But in the middle of all this death stands the One who is the Life, and who calls us to life. To die and rise with Him now and so live forever. So should we be surprised that this life looks a little bit different, a little bit more unusual than what is common in the world? . . .

And the One who calls you to life today calls you now to receive His life in His Body and Blood, once hung and shed on the cross, now given here for you for the forgiveness of your sins, the strengthening of your faith, and the promise of everlasting life. That is the life James received, and which he then proclaimed to the world as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. The life that he gave up for that truth. A life of faith toward God and love toward one another. A life of receiving from God and giving to one another. The life of Christ, not just the brother of James - your brother, too, that you too not perish, but have everlasting life. That you be ***perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*** . . . even if it takes a trial or two.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.