

Rising Above the Sorrows of the Flesh

BEAU HUGHES, *April 5, 2009*

We're going to be in James 1 this evening. It's always a bittersweet thing for me when I have the opportunity to come up here and speak. Forty times out of the year, Matt preaches and about ten times out of the year I get the opportunity to preach, the privilege to stand in front of you and share the Word of God. It's kind of a bittersweet thing. I was telling my staff as we prayed this morning that I feel like a kid that sometimes gets to go to the ice cream shop ten times a year. He walk in and there's 31 flavors, but he only gets to go 10 times a year, and so he had better choose wisely. So every time I have the opportunity to preach, I know this is one less time I'm going to get to speak in front of you. And so I'm always trying to be attentive to what the Lord would have me say and to what's going on in our body. As I talk to our staff and talk to you, I'm always trying to discern what the Lord would want to say in these times. Because I think these ten times that we have each year at this campus are really special. They're really significant, and the Lord really uses them. Typically what I've done over the first year and a half that we've had this campus is I've tried to cast the vision for why we believe God has given us a campus in the middle of the city of Denton. So every time I've gotten up here, I've talked about how we don't believe God gave us a campus here just so that we could steward growth here at the Village, but rather we believe God gave us a campus here so that our church could be on mission in the city of Denton, so that we could be a community of God's people here that love the Lord and seek the Lord, but then also seek the welfare of our city. We talk a lot about Jeremiah 29 where the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem, the Israelites went into captivity and God told His people while they were exiles, "This is what I want you to do. I don't want you to keep wondering when I'm going to come. I'm going to come in about 70 years. But until I come back and rescue you, I want you to seek the welfare of the city to which I sent you. Because in its welfare, in its good, as you seek its good, you will find your good." And so we've talked about how even though we're not Israel and we're not in Babylon and nobody came in and conquered us and sent us into exile, the Scriptures very clearly say that we are exiles here. We're just passing through, we're strangers, and this is the city where God has chosen to place us in this season of our lives. And as we await redemption, as we await Jesus Christ to return, we want to be missionaries in this city. We want to seek the welfare of the city of Denton. And so we love the city of Denton, we think much of it. In fact, if you look at the bulletin, you'll see we just have a passion to see men and women in this city come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. And even if they don't, we have a passion to serve them and work for the good of the city. And so many of you have believed in that and have come together to start to pursue that, and it's been incredible. So that's what I've done every time I've gotten up here over the first year and a half. I've talked about that, I've preached about that, I've tried to keep that vision in front of you and you guys have just taken it and ran with it. In fact, numerous times I've gotten up here and just challenged the college students to not just make this home for four years but to pray about making this your home after you graduate, to think about doing life with us. And so many of you, as you've graduated and have found that it's not the easiest place to find a job, you have sensed the Lord calling you to do that and it's just been beautiful.

So I thought maybe I could talk about that again. Then I thought, "Well no. I'll just talk about it for five minutes." And then I thought maybe I could talk about all the good things that are happening on our campus. There are so many things to praise the Lord for. I thought I could just get up and share with you, because I know you don't get to hear all the good stories that we get to hear, all the stories of life change. I know you saw the baptism last week, but there's all these stories about what God's doing and how every single week He is reaching down into this world and drawing men and women to Himself. And we get front row seats to it here, and it's just been unbelievable. Not only that, but there's just so many ways that the Lord has His hand upon our campus. I think there's something in the water here because there's babies just popping out everywhere. And we want to praise the Lord for that. We love babies, we love children and the

fact that the Lord is opening wombs is a miracle and a gift. So I thought maybe I could come up here and talk about that. And the other thing that's happening around here that I'm really excited about is that there's lots of people getting engaged and getting married. And I know I got up here about a year ago and preached and hollered at the guys for about an hour and told them to get married that week. I got a lot of feedback from that, most of it negative, but even this week it's been joyful. I can count about 5-6 weddings lined up that I'm officiating this summer, and among people that I know there's about a dozen godly men who have asked to marry godly women and they're planning on getting married and they're walking through the premarital counseling program here, heading towards the altar. And It couldn't make me more happy. Praise the Lord for that.

And I thought maybe I could just talk about the good things that are happening here, but as I really sought the Lord and really prayed, the Lord began to really press upon my heart. And what I want to talk about is really the flip side of everything good the Lord is doing around here, because at the same time there are so many trials that our family is walking through now. And I can even look around tonight and see many of you of whom I know your story and there are so many of you that are just in a valley and you're struggling. It's everything from cancer to infertility to miscarriages. I think there's been as many miscarriages if not more than people who have carried their pregnancy to term. You just name it, it ranges from unemployment to wayward children. There's just so many circumstances that are pressing our family right now. And so I thought and I sense that this is what the Lord would have us do tonight, that I could just get up here and encourage our family. So if you're not a part of our family, I'm so glad you're here. You're just going to get to hear me, as best as I know how, encourage our family as I read the Scriptures tonight. But I want to encourage us as we walk through these valleys, because my hope and my prayer and my burden for us as a family is that suffering is going to come. But for us as a family, I pray to God that we would never lose one person because they don't have a framework for God's providence, they don't have a framework for the goodness of God in and through their suffering. I pray that when bad things happen, not one would shake their fist at the Lord and say, "If this is the way You treat Your children, I want no part of You." I don't ever want that to happen in our family. And so what I want to do is just stand on James' shoulders as best as I know how and reach out and hold out encouragement to us as a family. A wise person said once, "You're either walking into a trial, you're in the middle of a trial or you're just finishing up with one and are about to start walking back into one." So even if you're not in the valley right now, even if you're not in the darkest part of it, I think this can be relevant for you. So I just pray that the Lord would encourage who needs encouragement. And if you are in that dark place, I know that it can be hard sometimes to accept encouragement from someone to whom you're going, "Well you don't know me, you don't know where I'm at and you have no idea how I feel." I know it's really hard when you're there to open up, to let down your guard a little bit, especially if you don't know that the person who's talking to you knows anything about suffering themselves. So let me just clarify. The book of James from which I'm going to read from was written by James, the half brother of Jesus Christ. So he watched his brother be crucified, beaten, mocked and spat upon. Not only that but he was the chief pastor among many pastors among the church in Jerusalem from the very beginning. And I don't know how much you know about church history, but to be a Christian in Jerusalem right after Jesus was crucified was not a popular thing. It didn't win you a lot of brownie points with your neighbors, and there was severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem. And James was a part of that. And in case that's not enough on his résumé of suffering, he ended his life by being stoned to death. So as you hear this pastor encourage the people to whom he's written this letter, I pray that you would let your guard down and allow him to speak to your heart, because he knows.

And me being the messenger of this, I won't say that I have a résumé anywhere close to James or yours, but I will tell you this. This is coming from someone tonight who has spent the last nine months walking through the darkest valley that I've ever experienced in my life. I'm only 27, so I'm sure there's more to come, but this is not something that I'm preaching at you. This is something that I'm learning with you. Many of you know my story, but my whole life growing up I've just had this bent towards depression, I've had this bent towards self-pity, I've had this bent towards despair. I've

struggled with it my whole life, and the majority of my life I've been on antidepressant medication. That's not altogether bad, but that's where I've been. And so that has kind of helped and shielded me from some of the fears and anxieties. But over the last year, I really sensed that as I was with men and women and seeking the Lord, it was time for me to step away from my medication. And I'm not encouraging you to do that if you're on medication, especially by yourself and cold turkey. That would be foolish. But for me, as I sought counsel and as I prayed, as I talked with my wife and the men I do life with and the doctors, I just felt like this was a good step for me. And so I've spent the last nine months of my life having this shield removed from me, and I've experienced fear and things that I would not wish upon any of you. And in a lot of ways I felt like I was a 7 year old when it came to dealing with so many of these things. And so as I exhort you tonight, as I encourage you tonight, I'm doing so as someone who is learning and struggling through these things with you. So again I pray that the Lord would help you to put down your guard.

So enough of me talking. Let's read. He starts off with the greeting, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," I think it's just amazing that he worships his brother. I mean, I'm not worshiping my brother. I just think it's amazing that when he talks about Jesus Christ, he talks about Him as Lord. It helps me believe that this is real. If it wasn't true, why would James be saying this about his brother. It just doesn't make any sense to me. Let's keep reading. "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:" So these tribes were Jews and gentiles who were dispersed all over the known world at the time. They had been dispersed from Jerusalem. This is how he starts his letter. He doesn't spend a lot of time with doctrine. These men and women are already Christians, and so he writes them and begins with encouragement. He says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, 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." This to me is one of these texts in the Scriptures that I honestly try to get away from. Just read the first sentence of this, "Count it all joy," and I think, "Surely this means something different in the Greek. Surely that means something other than what it clearly looks like it means. Surely he's not just saying count it all joy." And I've wrestled with this all weekend, but in the Greek it means, "Count it all joy, pure joy." He's not saying, "A little bit of joy and a lot of grief, but count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds." And of course he's not saying here that you don't get happy about the trials when they come. He's not saying you get happy about trials or that you like the fact that this negative thing happened to you. That's really twisted. That's not what he's saying at all. He's saying, "Count it all joy when trials come." And the word "trials" are not referring to the inner temptations. He's talking about external circumstances that are pressing upon you. So he's not talking about things that you've stumbled into because you've sinned and it's gone badly for you or things that you're wrestling with internally. He's saying, "Count it joy when you fall into these trials, when you fall into these circumstances, when things outside of yourself press upon you, things that are out of your control, when you run into these trials, count it all joy."

And so the immediate question that comes to my mind is: How in the world can you do that? And it's almost disheartening, is it not? Especially when you're in that place where you feel like joy is light years away from you and you read this and he's saying, "Brothers and sisters, count it all joy. This circumstance that's beating you down, this circumstance that's choking the life out of you, count it all joy." I just read this and go, "How? How in the world do you count it joy? Is James just naïve? Is this some sort of white-knuckle it and think good thoughts and listen to good Christian music? How does this happen?" Well, I praise the Lord that James, knowing suffering himself, didn't just say, "Count it all joy" and leave us. But he tells us how the Lord accomplishes that in our heart, and it's unbelievable. And I want you to think about this reality through this tonight. Only a believer in Jesus Christ has the ability to do this. How marvelous is it to be a Christian? We have the ability, even in our trials, to find joy. And I'm not talking about happiness here. And here's what he says about how that happens. He says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know..." So it's not just naiveté. The reason we can count it joy is because we know something. There's something about these trials that we know. And this word "know" here is not just cognitive knowledge, it's a knowledge learned from experience. I think it was Jonathan Edwards who said that there's a difference between knowing

honey is sweet because someone's told you about it and knowing that it's sweet because you've tasted it. And the kind of knowledge that James is talking about here is the knowledge from experience. "You can count it joy because you know, you've tasted it, you've experienced it. You know something about these trials." And what we know about these trials he says is that "that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." So we know that these trials are not just random but they're tests of our faith. And I think that it's amazing because we tend to think when these things surround us that it's a test of our will, a test of our strength, a test of our body, a test of our mind or a test of our emotions. And maybe it is all of those things, but James is saying it's primarily a test of our faith. These things are happening because it's testing your faith. And can we just think for a minute together and thank the Lord that He tests our faith? How else do you know your faith is genuine unless it's tested? Because of what you say? Because of what we sing? How else will you ever know your faith is genuine unless it's tested and you persevere? And after that perseverance you can look back and say, "God really is doing. He's already given me faith. He's really refining me. This is real, it's genuine. It's not just what I say, it's not just my parents' faith, it's not just Matt Chandler's faith. This is my faith." And that knowledge only comes through testing.

It reminds me of when we had to do math homework. I wasn't very good at math, so I hated the homework to begin with. But I really hated it because they made you show and test your work. It was just brutal, but if you got it right, it was unbelievable. I'd get so frustrated with the teacher, but the teacher wasn't doing it for their good. It was for my good. And how else am I going to learn, how else am I going to ever know that what I did was right unless I test it? This is somewhat James is saying about these test of our faith. The other picture that came to my mind was the movie *The Patriot* with Mel Gibson. The opening scene in the movie is him in his woodshed and he's just finished making this rocking chair. You can't really tell exactly what's going on in the scene, but you can see he's just finished it, he's admiring his work and then he goes to sit in it. He does it kind of slowly at first. He sits down and starts to rock and it just crumbles and falls apart. He picks it up all frustrated and throws it in the corner, and apparently there are like 80 other chairs that he's tried to make that have been thrown in the corner. But it's this idea of him testing his work. The only way he was going to find out if it's a good chair was to sit in it. It looks good, it looks finished until you test it and then you find out if it's really finished, if it's really good, how the craftsmanship really is.

And the good work that our God has begun in you, He's going to bring it to completion and He's going to test it. Because in testing it, He proves to you and to the world around you that what He's doing is genuine, it's pure, it's real. Thank God that He tests us. So this is part of how we can have joy, because we know that these are tests. It's not God's anger, it's not God's wrath. These are tests that God is using to produce something, and James says that what it's producing is steadfastness. And steadfastness is literally a word that means to stand, but it also carries the idea of standing underneath something. So these tests of our faith are purifying our faith so that we're able to stand under weight. The story that came to my mind was actually a story of the antithesis of this. Years ago I was a student pastor and I invited John Warren to come lead music for our Fall retreat weekend. I don't know what you know about John Warren, but he loves him some fun. I'm somewhat boring, but John Warren is a fun guy. If there's fun involved, John is there. It's just a party all the time when you're with John, especially when he gets really hyper. So I bring John Warren up, and he's being John Warren. And after one of the sessions, we're having free time with all these campers. I had also asked a friend of mine named Amy Oliver to come up and sing with John, who's this petite little thing. So we're just hanging out on this picnic table and John says, "Hey Amy, I've got an idea. Why don't you stand right here and I jump on your back?" And I guess Amy had fear of man or something because she said okay. And so John gets on the picnic table and jumps on her. It went exactly like I imagined. She just fell on the ground. She didn't even put her hands out. She just fell on the ground. It was unbelievable. She just crumbled beneath him. I love the Lord for allowing me to have that moment, but that is the antithesis of what James is saying that the testing of our faith produces. He's saying steadfastness is what the Lord is producing in you through these trials so that you might be able to stand when the weight of the world jumps on your shoulders.

My teacher in seminary, Sinclair Ferguson, was preaching over this passage. He said a passage he vividly remembers as a child was Ephesians 6. Ephesians 6 talks about putting on the full armor of God. It says, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." He said, "I vividly remember reading that passage as a young child and thinking to myself, 'Is that really all there is to the Christian life, that you just stand against the schemes of the enemy? Is that really it? There's no aggression? No offense? You're just standing against the schemes of the enemy?'" And he said, "You know what? Thirty years later, this is one of the most glorious passages in the entire Bible to me. To look at other saints I know who have suffered and struggled and had the weight of the world cast upon them and to see that they are still standing, it's glorious. It's absolutely glorious." And this is what James is saying. We can rejoice because we know that these tests are producing steadfastness.

We know that they're producing steadfastness, but steadfastness is not an end in itself. Steadfastness produces something. So you're tested, and you're more steadfast. You're tested again, and you can hold more weight on your shoulders. And it goes like this all the way through our Christian life. Steadfastness upon steadfastness upon steadfastness, and we get stronger and stronger and stronger in our faith until steadfastness has "its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In other words, until we're conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. The reason that we can have joy and that we can consider joy in the midst of our struggles and griefs is because we know that the what pain is producing is Christ-likeness. And as Christians, knowing Jesus Christ and becoming like Him is the foremost desire of our heart. And if we know, in the pain, that God is giving us and producing in us the foremost desire of our heart, how can we not find joy in it, even though it stinks? Isn't that unbelievable? He's saying, "The reason that you can have joy is because you know that this is producing the very thing that you want the most, which is Christ-likeness. And because it's producing Christ-likeness, think about that, know that, remember that, believe that and you can have joy." John Calvin, one of my favorite authors and theologians, put it like this, "It is, indeed, certain, that all the senses of our nature are so formed, that every trial produces in us grief and sorrow;" In other words, it's just in our nature that when trials come, it's going to produce grief and sorrow. That's okay. James is not saying that if that's the case, then you're a bad Christian. No. It should do that. It's in our nature that when things happen, when things that are outside of ourself push in on our soul, our faith and our life, it produces grief and sorrow. He says, "and no one of us can so far divest himself of his nature as not to grieve and be sorrowful whenever he feels any evil. But this does not prevent the children of God to rise, by the guidance of the Spirit, above the sorrow of the flesh. Hence it is, that in the midst of trouble they cease not to rejoice. . . We certainly dread diseases, and want, and exile, and prison, and reproach, and death, because we regard them as evils; but when we understand that they are turned through God's kindness unto helps and aids to our salvation, it is ingratitude to murmur, and not willingly to submit to be thus paternally dealt with." Unbelievable.

Maybe you're better with a word picture. C.S. Lewis told a parable by George MacDonald and he said this, "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of — throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but he is building up a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself." This is why we have joy, even in the midst of our trials, because we know that this is what the Lord's producing in us through them. And so if you're there right now, I'm there with you. I pray that you're encouraged by what the Lord's doing in your life. My friend, my brother, my sister, He's not angry with you. He loves you. And just because we're finite and we're small and we can't see the whole picture and we don't know what's happening, put your faith in the Lord. He is building a mansion. And to be honest, most of us are okay with a cottage. We want to be Christ-like, but we really don't want it that much. But He's saying, "You do, and let Me help you get there."

So this is great. This is what James says. This is his encouragement to the church. So what do you do if you know these things? Maybe you've heard this passage preached, preached many times, preached a lot better than I did tonight and you know it mentally, but you don't know like you know honey is sweet because you've tasted it. What do you do? Well, there's two things that I've been doing. And I know this is not the most extraordinarily practical thing, but there are two things you can think about, pray about and meditate about. One is that you can beg. If this is where you're at and you know these things and want these things but you just aren't there yet, beg that the Father would continue to make Jesus Christ the utmost desire in your heart. Because at the end of the day, do you know what we have to be honest about? The thing I had to be honest with myself over the last nine months is that sooner or later I was really confronted with the question: Is Christ-likeness really what I want more than anything else? Is that really what I want? And you know what I began to discover about myself as I prayed that prayer and asked the Lord? What I really wanted was for Him to take away the pain. And the reason that I would run to Him was not for Him as an end to Himself. I wanted to go to Him so that He would relieve me of the discomfort. And so pray for Him, for His sake, because He's valuable, that you run to Him and want Him and worship Him and run after Him, even if He never relieves the pain. And pray that He would do that in your heart. I've got a Scripture. Philippians 3 talks about what it was like in Paul's life. "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." And so pray that God would do this in your heart. I've been praying that He would do it. And when He reveals things in your heart that maybe you didn't know that were there, like that maybe He's not the foremost pursuit, just repent and ask Him to make Himself that. And if you need some hands on, practical help with that, Recovery is a great place to start here at the church. I know that there's this idea going around that Recovery is for addicts, alcoholics. Well, it is for addicts in a sense, but it's discipleship. It helps you step by step pursue Christ in such a way that He becomes ultimate in your life. It's a great place to start if you really want this, you're struggling with this and that's your prayer.

And there's a second thing that I would encourage you to do if you're in this place where you know this but your heart hasn't caught up with it. Apparently the early Christians struggled with this too, and over and over and over again, here's what the writers of the Scriptures exhorted them to do. Remember Jesus Christ and His sufferings. Preach to yourself the gospel. You had to know I was going to get around to talking about this. Remember the gospel. Think about the gospel. The writer of Hebrews says this, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." Remember Jesus Christ crucified. Remember that though He was reviled, though He had His beard pulled from his face, though He was spat upon, though He was mocked and lashed and beaten until He was unrecognizable, Peter says, "He opened not His mouth and He reviled not back, but He entrusted Himself to the Father so that He might be our example." The Founder and Protector of our faith, the One who knows testing of our faith better than any of us is Jesus Christ. And I know sometimes we don't think of Him like this. We go, "Well He's God, so He doesn't know what it's like to have His faith tested. He doesn't know what it's like to have temptation." Well actually Jesus Christ knows what testing is like in a more powerful way than any of us, because He never gave into sin. He took testing to its furthest reaches and never broke. So actually He knows testing better than you, better than me, better than anyone, and He's our example. Because we are unable to do these things in ourselves, we look to Him, we remember Him, we think about Him, we preach His gospels to ourselves and each other. And in Him, we find the strength to move forward eventually in the fullness of joy.

And the beautiful thing tonight as we come into the Lord's supper, we have an opportunity to do both. As we take the bread that represents Christ's body broken and we dip it in the juice that represents Christ's blood shed for the remission of sins, we have the opportunity to ask the Lord as we taste it, to Himself more valuable to us than anything else. And I'm

not talking about bad things. I'm talking namely about the things that we hold onto so tightly that are so good. We have an opportunity to say, "Make everything else rubbish compared to You." And at the same time, we have an opportunity to remember His death, look forward to His return. I don't know that there's a more fitting week to start thinking about these things together than this week. As we look towards Easter, we look to the cross. And as we look to the cross, we're encouraged through our own trials.

"So Father, I pray for my family. There is so much going on in our family, so many trials. And Father, we thank You that You love us enough to test our faith. I thank You that You have not left our family but these tests, these trials that we're going through individually and corporately are tangible evidence that You love us. Because you only discipline those You love. And so I pray tonight that You would give us the faith not to abhor Your discipline but, like Your Son, gladly receive it and be purified by it. I do pray for those who are in a really, really deep dark place right now. I pray for those who really do feel like they're just going to crumple up underneath the weight of the world. I pray as we come to the Lord's supper that You would encourage them and remind them that Jesus Christ really did carry the weight of the world, that He endured it. And because He did, we can come to Him in faith. And even when we don't feel like we can walk, we can run to Him and know that He's with us. Help us with these things, Father. Our faith is so weak, and so we come to Your Son whose faith is so strong. And we remember Him tonight in the Lord's supper. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

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