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Christmas and New Year are now well behind us, and we are almost at the end of the first month of the new year! Between now and Easter we shall look at some of the "**smaller**" letters in the New Testament. They may be **small** in size perhaps, tucked in between the larger ones of Hebrews and Revelation, but these **smaller** letters are substantial in content!

Paul and Peter are the '**big**' missionaries who grab the headlines, but there is much to learn from the less-celebrated apostles, who were no doubt significant, each in their own way. Philip seemed to be doing a good job in Samaria, when was **teleported** (remember Star Trek and the phrase "*Beam me up Scotty*"?) to the road leading out of Gaza to meet a high ranking official in the court of the Emperor of Ethiopia who was reading an ancient text in the book of Isaiah! Having explained the meaning of the text, the official wanted to be baptised and Philip obliged!

Beyond Biblical accounts, there are many historically reliable extra-Biblical texts about the life and times of the 11 Disciples. We learn that Thomas and Bartholomew travelled together through Persia to Southern India, where after sometime, Bartholomew left and traced his step back to Persia and onto Armenia and Kazakhstan, where after a few years he was beheaded.

About twenty years or so after the resurrection of Jesus, and about 15 years or so after the dramatic conversion of Paul, the disciples and those close to Jesus felt time was ebbing away and they had to document what they knew and understood about the life of Christ, and the message from God He taught the twelve.

It is generally accepted, the letter by James' was the first to be written. One can imagine, when discussions took place about documenting the life and teachings of Jesus, the Disciples would have suggested James,

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being Jesus' younger brother, who grew up with Jesus in the same home, and knew Him most intimately.

It is a wonderful letter of encouragement addressed to the Jews dispersed across the world, those not in Jerusalem, which had become a hotbed of power politics.

Using the Book of Proverbs as a framework, James draws on the wisdom of his brother Jesus, sharing sensible and prudent wisdom, primarily with the Jewish community across the world, but also with all worshipping communities, churches included. James is not teaching new theology; he challenges believers how they should live.

James was a significant peace-broker at the Council in Jerusalem when the discussion arose, *Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.*¹ Having heard their argument and also Peter's response, James said, *It is my judgement, therefore, we should not make it difficult for the gentiles who are turning to God.*²

This has continued to be a major struggle in the Church, the conflict between retaining the practice of what each generation sees as "*old time religion*", which at the time served a purpose, and understanding the essentials of our faith, that which can be adapted with changes in society, without losing its intended meaning.

The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist is one such. Over centuries, the emphasis has shifted from it being a **remembrance** of the life and sacrifice of Jesus, to arguments whether wine or juice should be served, whether bread must be unleavened, whether it is served on silverware. In some Christian traditions, the absence of lace or fine

¹ Acts 15:1

² Acts 15:19

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needlepoint material draped over the bread and cup of wine, is a sacrilege! Those who say this believe it reeks of irreverence, disrespect and lacks piety!

The origin of this practice of covering the bread and cup was to keep flies and bees from falling to the cup, and where sanitation was not proper, to prevent flies from contaminating the bread!

James the peace-broker opens his letter with a powerful contrast arousing interest of the reader: *Consider it pure joy my friends, whenever you face trials of many kinds...*

Trials and joy?! ... **pure, unadulterated, uncontaminated** joy, when you face **trials of many kinds**?! It's the kind of teaching you would hear from the generation who smoked the happy weed. The only trial they knew was being dragged away by the police from peaceful protests at which they hurled foul-mouthed insults, and be denied their daily dose of pot and the intimate company of a man or a woman.

James' opening sentence is very clear. He speaks from personal conviction, **WHEN you face trials...**, not **IF you face trials...** He is absolutely certain - life is about going through trials and difficulties.

James is speaking Truth when he makes this claim. Trials and difficulties are a part of this life, on this side of eternity. Peter makes it clear, it is only **for a little while**, but many of us know, **a little while...** can be for days, weeks, months, and for some, a lifetime, but in the context of eternity, it is **a little while!**

We must make clear, no one can compare their difficulty or trial with another's. It is true, *No one understands what I am going through*, no one

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can. Many of us can *sympathise* with another person's pain or difficulty, but it takes a very few can genuinely empathise and feel another's angst.

I have heard it said to me and to others I know, *Brother, I feel your pain!*, spoken by well-meaning, well-intentioned people, but James says, **No one can help you FEEL better when you are going through trials and difficulties and pain, except you yourself!**

How then do we, in the midst of insurmountable, over-whelming difficulties, find this **pure joy**?

Consider it... says James. It is in your attitude, your outlook, your understanding of WHO is in charge of your life, that you can find this pure joy. **Consider it...**, use the faculties of your mind. God has given us TWO powerful tools to navigate through the difficulties of life:

The first is **free-will**. God made us in His image; God has free-will and He has gifted us with free will. We can choose what we want to do and how we want to live our lives. We can argue with others about the meaning of life and how unfair life is, that we don't have what someone else has, that others can be generous because they have and we don't, and so on.

The second powerful tools to navigate through the difficulties of life is **choice**, or as James says, exercise the power of our mind to **consider it pure joy**.

James knows the dangers of **only** exercising the power of our minds as it can lead to being in denial; that nothing is really happening; being told, or believing myself, it's all a figment of my imagination.

James puts it in perspective. **Consider it pure joy my friends, when you go through trials and difficulties of many kinds, because...** Ah! there is a reason for us to be going through trials and difficulties.

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...because you know, the testing of your faith develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its work that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James' opening thought is very important, both to the world in which he lived, and the world in which we live:

- The **intention** of facing difficulties and trials and is our **faith**, and whenever we use the word **faith**, we must clarify it by answering the question, **In whom?**
- Once we have clearly answered the question, **In whom?**, James explains, the trials and difficulties you face are a **testing** of your faith.

Let's be very clear: it is not a pass or fail test; the test James is referring to, is a progression test, like working towards a professional qualification: when you master a certain subject or topic, you are tested on it and you move onto the next. When you have completed all the tests, you have attained professional status, a level of maturity.

- The intention of our trials is to build faith in God. The **purpose** of trials is to develop **endurance**. The word comes from running sports. Usain Bolt excels in short distance sprints, and Mo Farah excels in long distance marathons. Usain Bolt needs a burst of strength to run short distances, but Mo Farah needs stamina to run a marathon. **Stamina is another word for endurance**. The purpose of trials is to develop endurance, stamina for the long haul of life.
- Finally, the proper **response** to trials of any kind and difficulty of all kinds, is **pure joy**. If you have answered the question of faith, **In**

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whom?, as being Almighty God, your Father in Heaven, who has given you life, and Jesus the Christ who has given you a purpose for living God's life, the next step is to learn to **consider it pure joy when you go through trials of many kinds.**

Let me leave you with this thought to consider this week:

Worry is a conversation with yourself, about things you cannot change.

Prayer is a conversation you have with God, about things **HE** can change.

This is the progression of tests we face, to journey from worrying about the things we cannot change, to developing a relationship with God and talking to Him about the things **He can** change.

AMEN.