

RUF Large Group Bible Study  
Rev. Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister<sup>1</sup>  
Sept. 2, 2004  
James 1:1-5<sup>2</sup>

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Aron Ralston went biking and canyoneering. He went by himself and left only this as a hint of his location – “Utah.” He didn’t even know where he was headed, but ended up at Horseshoe Canyon in Canyonlands National Park. At just before 3pm, he’d scrambling around the rocks, feels one about to give way and jumps off it. He looks up, and sees the rock falling. He can’t move backwards or he’ll fall over a ledge. So he tries to get out of the way, and almost does. Except for one thing – the rock pins his right hand into the side of the wall.

You may have heard about Aron. Because what happens next is incredible. For six days, Aron is out there on this ledge with his hand smashed by the rock. He fights delirium and exhaustion. He has to drink his own urine to survive. He makes every possible attempt to smash the rock, or lift it or... something. He has a digital recorder and makes goodbye videos for his family because he realizes at some point that he will either die right there or he has one other option. Something he doesn’t want to do. Doesn’t think he can do. At 2pm the next day, for the first time, Aron seriously considers amputating his arm.<sup>3</sup> He realizes that he can either experience a slow death of dehydration or heart failure or he might, just might be able to salvage his life by losing his arm. He’s not sure what to do.

Tonight we begin James. Tonight we talk about trials and perseverance. What could you do? What can you stand? In stark contrast to Aron Ralston are the girls of the book and movie *The Virgin Suicides*. Five sisters end their lives, four on one day about a year after the first, thirteen-year-old Cecilia. Why? Author Jeffery Eugenides doesn’t really give a hint to that – maybe because their parents were oppressive and mean? Maybe because society had brought them down?<sup>4</sup> The signature line of the movie comes right at the beginning, when Cecilia talks to a psychologist after her first unsuccessful attempt. “You shouldn’t be here,” he says. “What could be so bad for you?” She looks at him and says impassively, “You obviously have never been a thirteen year old girl.” There you have it. The rationale for suicide. Not too persuasive, though perhaps a good picture of where we are in our society.

James gives us a really different answer. He is incredibly realistic and yet hopeful at the same time. He’s neither a masochist saying, Yeah, bring on the trials! Nor is he a hedonist who says that there is no joy until the trials go away. There will be trials in your life, whether you are a Christian or not.<sup>5</sup>

The first thing we need to see is that the author of this book is James the brother of Jesus, also called James the Just. He wrote this in his early leadership of the Jerusalem church, just prior to the Jerusalem council.<sup>6 7</sup>

The book of James has often suffered under the reputation of being sub-Christian (an idea mistakenly gotten from some of Luther’s frustrated quotes). However, 1) James contains some individual ideas embedded in the work which are not Jewish but Christian, 2) James has close affinities with some New Testament literature, and 3) James probably alludes to the words of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> We must remember too that James has a context and that is to argue for the ethical, in which it appears that James is assuming the theological. One doesn’t have to say everything every time, and James’ lack of a detailed Christology certainly doesn’t mean he doesn’t have one.

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<sup>2</sup> Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller’s sermons on James found at [www.redeemer.com](http://www.redeemer.com); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter’s Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer’s Grove, Illinois, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Story from Aron’s article in *Outside* magazine, Sept. 2004 issue.

<sup>4</sup> I think this may be part of what he says because of the theme of the cutting down of the trees that goes through the movie.

<sup>5</sup> Contra the health and wealth gospel preachers, of which my cousin is a part of. He maintains that anything wrong with your life is a result of a lack of faith or of sin. Apparently the witnesses of Job and Jesus do not count.

<sup>6</sup> James the son of Zebedee most likely died too early to leave any writings and James the son of Alphaeus completely drops out of sight so as to think that he wouldn’t be able to get by without any designation besides “James.” It seems only James the brother of Jesus would have the “name-recognition” to be able to identify himself with only James. People have argued that the quality of the Greek in the book of James is far above that of a carpenter’s son, but that isn’t compelling. James very likely would have known Greek, the Greek isn’t that wonderful, and James also could have employed the use of an amanuensis, a writing assistant.

<sup>7</sup> One reason we date the book of James as pre-Jerusalem council is because James makes no mention of the controversy discussed there. It seems that at the point of this letter, James and Paul have not yet met and this matter of circumcision has not become a flashpoint. James appears to be arguing against a misunderstanding of Paul, one that we might presume took hold in many places, as it does today in fact.

<sup>8</sup> Davids, p. 14

James seems to exude the Sermon on the Mount, and he applies these principles in practicalities. It also appears that James is working off of the “preliterary synoptic tradition”<sup>9</sup>, which means that there were source traditions that James knew of before they were written down. Since James wasn’t a follower of Jesus during Jesus’ lifetime, one might surmise that he had some catching up to do after he realized just who his brother was. However, it doesn’t necessarily follow that he had never heard Jesus teach. We just simply can’t know how much first-hand knowledge James had, but it seems that he ascertained the nature of Jesus’ teachings encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount and used those to provide the backbone to his letter.<sup>10</sup>

It appears that James writes into the setting of the early church not doing well. Though many attempt to make the church in Acts an idyllic one without problems, it had many. One of them was the same problem that was happening throughout Israel. There was a growing population and less and less land to be had. People were getting squeezed more and more and the rich were taking advantage of the poor. With less money out there to be had, resentment of the rich was assured. And yet, when a rich person entered the church, he had to be cultivated and coddled, since his resources were so valuable and needed. This sounds pretty familiar to our situation today.

The community is facing the problem of suffering. Not acute persecution but something that the author sees as a test. “The test ought to create eschatological anticipated joy, for God’s purpose is not in any way malevolent but purificatory. They will show the virtue of patient endurance and thus come through with a greater perfection than before: they will be tried and true.”<sup>11</sup> That doesn’t mean the testing isn’t hard. It is, and some are complaining about it.

What is the proper response to such testing? Endure it patiently and ask for wisdom.

### ***James says Jesus is Lord***

So here we have James, the brother of Jesus. Think about that for a minute. We know that in Jesus’ lifetime that James didn’t believe in or follow him. But here he says that Jesus is Lord (κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). What’s changed?

First, remember that this isn’t just the normal nature of things. It’s not like, well of course someone this primitive would believe in a man becoming God. Jews wouldn’t have believed that a man could become God – in fact, they were the last people who might have believed such a thing.<sup>12</sup> Eastern views believed in avatars and the western views had the pantheon, but Jews thought that God was utterly independent and apart from the world. No way would he mix with the world like that. Jews wouldn’t even say God’s name, that’s how distinct they thought he was.

And here is the little half-brother of Jesus claiming to worship Jesus as God. That’s the impact of the world *kurios*. The Christians wouldn’t say Caesar Kurios like Caesar wanted them too; they reserved kurios only for the one true lord, Jesus Christ. Of any person to know that Jesus wasn’t all he was cracked up to be, wouldn’t it be his little brother? Isn’t that the way it goes with family-tells-all books exposing the real-life of a hero? But this Jew was raised with a brother named Jesus, and he now believes He is the son of God.

James missed out on following Jesus in his lifetime, but Jesus called him to himself after that. 1 Cor. 15:7 says, “Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.” Jesus made a special appearance to James, and it sure would have been cool to have sat in on that conversation (it was unusual in that Jesus normally appeared to groups of people).

Enough happened that James quickly becomes a leader in the Jerusalem church. He had missed so many years with Jesus, and then look what happens to him. In the midst of Peter, John and Paul, the early church elected James as the leader of the church. That’s a pretty high compliment.

According to Eusebius’s Church History (325 AD), James was martyred for his faith. He writes: “But after Paul, in consequence of his appeal to C’sar, had been sent to Rome by Festus, the Jews, being frustrated in their hope of entrapping him by the snares which they had laid for him, turned against James, the brother of the Lord, to whom the episcopal seat at Jerusalem had been entrusted by the apostles. The following daring measures were undertaken by them against him. Leading him into their midst they demanded of him that he should renounce faith in Christ in the presence of all the people. But, contrary to the opinion of all, with a clear voice, and with greater boldness than they had anticipated, he spoke out before the whole multitude and confessed that our Saviour and Lord Jesus is the Son of God. But they were unable to bear longer the testimony of the man who, on account of the excellence of ascetic virtue and of piety which he exhibited in his life, was esteemed by all as the most just of men, and consequently they slew him. Opportunity for this deed of violence was furnished by the prevailing anarchy, which was caused by the fact that Festus had died just at this time in Judea, and that the province was thus without a governor and head. The manner of James’ death has been already indicated by

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<sup>9</sup> Davids, p. 16

<sup>10</sup> Of course, some have argued that James shouldn’t be in the canon at all. 1) The evidence suggests that James was not so much *rejected* as *neglected*. While evidence for the use and authoritative status of James is not as early or widespread as we might wish, very few early Christians, knowing the letter, dismissed it. 2) the neglect that James experienced can be readily explained. Early Christians tended to accord special prominence to books written by apostles; and James was such a common name that many probably wondered whether the letter had any apostolic origin. Moreover, James is filled with rather traditional and quite practical admonition; it is not the kind of book that would figure prominently in early Christian theological debates. 3) Finally, the destination of the letter may also account for its relative neglect. The letter was probably written to Jewish Christians living in Palestine and Syria. These churches disappeared at any early date; and letters written to them may similarly have disappeared for a time. Moo, p. 4

<sup>11</sup> Davids, p. 37

<sup>12</sup> We discussed this in the Spring of 2004 – see “The Resurrection: Luke 24”

the above-quoted words of Clement, who records that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, and was beaten to death with a club. But Hegesippus, who lived immediately after the apostles, gives the most accurate account in the fifth book of his *Memoirs*.<sup>13</sup>

How could James endure such a trial? He said, World, you owe me nothing. You have nothing of value I want and you can take nothing from me. I've been given everything by Jesus. James could literally and completely say, "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee."

James was ready for what happened to him. He had a different perspective than *The Virgin Suicides*.

### ***James says testing will come for our good***

We're finally getting off of the first verse. James' first thing, the very first thing he says is "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*" James isn't bashful about getting around to his point. He wants to talk about troubles, trials, testing. So we must as well.

The first thing we see here is that James writes that troubles will come. Not that they might come, but that they will come. It's not like if you are a Christian, you are protected from trials and troubles. They are inevitable.

One author writes, "Drunk, and kissing us, or passing out in chairs, they were bound for college, husbands, child-rearing, unhappiness only dimly perceived – bound, in other words, for life."<sup>14</sup> To be in life is to be in troubles, at least in some point. Our society is really squeamish about troubles. We want to sue and litigate, commit suicide if things don't go our way. That hasn't always been the case. Up to this point in history, everyone realized that life is/was unfair. Why is this changing? Because our secular society says that life is defined by NOW. When life is defined by NOW, then if NOW goes bad you've got nothing. A different way to look at it, the way most people in the history of the world have looked at it, is to realize that there is more out there. Riches here are nice, but there are real riches out there. Happiness here is great, but there is real happiness in the future. This is a different perspective.<sup>15</sup>

So if they are coming, then what should we do to handle them? James says that we should consider them, count them all joy.

This is a balanced approach – consider it pure joy. Not a masochist or a hedonist. He doesn't say enjoy your trials. And he doesn't say that you won't have any joy until the trials go away. He says if you learn how to think and how to handle your troubles, then you can find joy in your troubles.<sup>16</sup>

*Consider/count* – look at what the troubles can bring you. James says that we have to think about it, because our natural inclination is going to be to run from and hate trials and troubles. But great things can happen in your life through suffering. James says that they come into your life so that you may be complete. So somehow, you're incomplete without suffering. Suffering brings humility, freedom, compassion and faith, and it's hard to see how you can get these without suffering.

*Humility* comes when we're brought low by something we can't control. Paul was a great leader and God gave him all kinds of greatness – and also the "thorn in his flesh." My strength in you is only made perfect in weakness. I would have undone everything great if I hadn't suffered.

*Freedom* comes when God takes away something you thought you needed to have. When God takes it away and you survive, you change. You look back and say, "I guess I didn't need that after all. It had me by the throat. Thank you God for taking it away, even though it hurt at the time."

*Compassion* comes when you can relate to people now because of your suffering. (Luke 22:31-32, 2 Cor. 1:3-6)

*Faith* comes when you see that you love God for *who He is* instead of what He gets you. Too often we are serving God if and only if He serves our agendas and answers our prayers. Then we see that we only have faith in Him if He serves our agenda and we're using Him in that way. We don't see that until we suffer.

It is absolutely no trouble to show that trouble will come to God's people. Abraham was tested. Joseph sold into slavery and put in prison, unjustly charged. Job proved himself faithful. The Israelites in the wilderness are the prime example of failure in the testing.

The test will come and it is like a refiner's fire. (1 Peter 1:6-7) James already assumes something will be left after the refining process, that the Christian will pass the test. Fortitude or Patient Endurance is the result of this testing, and that is something you can't have without a test. But fortitude isn't the end goal. Perfection is. "Perfection isn't just a maturing in character, but a rounding out as more and more "parts" of the righteous character are added."<sup>17</sup>

The Christian then has hope in something else, something that keeps him or her going. In contrast, the nonbeliever gives way, as Mark 4 illustrates: "16 *And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.*"

<sup>13</sup> quote found at: [http://www.cryingvoice.com/Christian\\_martyrs/James.html](http://www.cryingvoice.com/Christian_martyrs/James.html)

<sup>14</sup> *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 235, Jeffrey Eugenides

<sup>15</sup> thoughts from Keller

<sup>16</sup> What follows is from Keller, though MacArthur has similar thoughts in his commentary.

<sup>17</sup> Davids, p. 70

What is the demonstrable difference? Perseverance. Steadfastness.

The Greek word here is ὑπομονήν (*hypermenaen*) which means to stand your ground or to “hyper stand/over stand.” That means that you “superstand.”

When trouble comes to you, were you praying, going to church, obeying the 10 commandments, loving your neighbor, and reading your Bible? Then **keep your ground**. Don’t stop. It will be harder, but stand your ground and your suffering will change you for the good.

When trouble comes, you also must, must, must think about the one who persevered for you. Hebrews 12:2 says “*looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*” <sup>3</sup> *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.* <sup>4</sup> *In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*” That gives you hope. In the midst of your trials, there is someone who suffered more than you could ever imagine and never let go. Jesus stood and took hell itself because... he loved us. All of God’s wrath and Jesus didn’t let go. He hyper stood. Look at how I loved you no matter what – and that’s how you know that there is no condemnation on you. There’s nothing you can do to get rid of Jesus’ love for you. Through his suffering, he persevered and stayed with you. That is the joy of your life. Now he may want you to suffer for him. Not just because it will make you a better person. But also because Jesus persevered for me. He took it all for me.

That is inspiring. When someone stands for another, it gives us goosebumps. It invigorates the other person. Think of Xmen 2 where Jean Grey (aka The Phoenix) stands her ground in the flood to save the others. She hyper stands.

Some of you out there have already come from pretty tough situations. You’ve already encountered trials. Divorces. Abuse. Rape. Dads out of work. Parents not home. Dashed dreams. When we look back some events can seem pretty small now, but they were big then. Not getting picked for the team. Left out. Made fun of.

But most of your hurts honestly lie ahead of you. There are some serious trials in this room. Moving away. Loneliness. A lost child. An unintended pregnancy. An unfaithful spouse. Being “downsized.” Your parents’ deaths. Not having a boyfriend or girlfriend. He or she picks someone else. You’re ready to get married but no one is on the horizon. A car accident. Not getting into the school you want.

How will you handle it? What will your perspective be? Will you be surprised by suffering? Will you throw in the towel? Will you be mad at God?

Or will you be surprised by joy? Hyper stand? See this as a test that produces faith and perseverance. Seek Jesus’ face. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) said that from the standpoint of heaven, the most miserable life will only look like one night in a bad hotel. We have a perspective that is different than the secularist, but it’s one that begins developing right now. You don’t just “get character.” You begin being faithful in the small things. You begin by asking God for that perspective right now. You seek Him in the daytime before you have to in the night.

Amy Carmichael, the great missionary to India wrote:

Hast thou no scar?  
No hidden scar on foot or side or hand?  
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,  
I hear them hail they bright ascendant star  
Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?  
Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent,  
Leaned me against the tree to die; and rent  
By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned;  
Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar?  
Yes, as the Master shall the servant be,  
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;  
But thine are whole; can he have followed far  
Who has no wound, nor scar?

Amy Carmichael, *Gold Cord*

Aron Ralston prepared himself to die. He didn't figure he'd make it through the fifth night. He was mentally and physically exhausted. His hand was rotting, and he couldn't get out. That night, he had a dream and in the dream he saw a young boy. "I now the boy is my own. I bend to scoop him into my left arm, using my handless right arm to balance him, and we laugh together as I swing him up to my left shoulder. The boy happily perches on my left shoulder while I steady him with my left hand and right stump. Smiling, I prance about the room, tiptoeing in and out of the sun dapples on the oak floor, and he giggles gleefully. Then, with a shock, the vision blinks out. I'm back in the canyon, echoes of his joyful sounds resonating in my mind. Despite having already come to accept that I will die where I stand before help arrives, now I believe I will live. That belief, that boy, changes everything for me."<sup>18</sup>

That morning, his sixth day on the mountain, Aron does something that he didn't think he could do. But, you see, he wanted to live for something else.<sup>19</sup>

Are you ready? Aron had never been able to figure out how he could saw through the bones in his arm. He only had two small pocket knife blades. They could get through flesh and even muscle, and by this point, he couldn't even feel it much when he tried. But they would never make it through bone. Then he had the answer. And he put all his pressure against a focal point – and he broke his first his radius and then his ulna just above his wrist.

You're not being asked to do that. Whew.

I guarantee you that Aron Ralston is a different person because of this. Would he rather have his hand back? Probably. But he wouldn't be the same person he is now if he did.

Your story may not be as dramatic as that, or it may be even more so. May God grant us the courage and the faith and the grace to count it joy when we face trials of many kinds.

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<sup>18</sup> Outside, p. 115

<sup>19</sup> Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychologist in a Nazi concentration camp, observed that the people who made it out alive were the ones who had a will to live for someone or something else. Faith or family were what they clinged to have hope for the future. Those without it, resigned themselves to death quickly and weren't there very long.