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Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
Bible passage or verse: James 1:2-12
Title of Sermon: The Sweet Fruit of Bitter Times
Series: Deep Roots - #3

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²Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. ⁹Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. ¹²Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

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Hey, would you turn in your Bibles to the Book of James. The Book of James. This was one of the last books accepted into the Canon. Martin Luther didn't like it. Martin Luther -- you know -- the old Martin Luther. He felt that it didn't align with the justification by faith. I think there was another reason. It's not easy. It's not an easy text. The text is clear, it's like straightforward. It calls us into check. And because of that -- I know sometimes when you go to school, you know, you start off, you have the 101 courses. That's kind of the entry level. And then you have the 201. This is a 401 course -- so just know, in our series of Deep Roots, this is a 401 level. And you'll understand -- if you've read it, you'll know where I'm headed. James chapter 1; let's begin in verse 2.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work." So, in other words, you don't get mature overnight. It's got to finish its work "so that you mature and complete, not lacking anything. And if any of you lacks wisdom" -- in the midst of this trial. Don't miss the context. It's not when you're at the grocery store -- "God, I need wisdom as to what meat to buy." That's not the context. In the midst of this trial, "if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He's a double-minded man, unstable in all that he does. You see, a brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich?" Well, contrary, "he should take pride in his low position -- because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossoms fall and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the man will fade away even when he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because, when he has stood the test," -- when he's finished -- "he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

Why is this a 401 course? Because suffering is the anvil of which all of life crushes you. And it's in the midst of that season that you will either be matured or revealed. Matured or hardened. And it is a test that all of us go through. You don't get to check out on it. Wish I did. I've said before that I believe that the Book of Job is a real person, a real life lived. And it is also, from my perspective, parabolic -- meaning, it is a parable, it is a life that is used like a parable to kind of, again, signify or describe all of life. Every one of you gets asked a question, and suffering makes you ask it. Why do I love God? Why do I love Him? Do I love Him because He's good to me? See, that was the accusation against God from Satan about Job. Satan came to God and said, "Hey, the only reason why Job loves you is because the guy's rich! I mean, he's got a great family, he's got unbelievable -- I mean, the guy's living in a penthouse! If you took it all away, God, he would curse you -- because that's the only reason why people worship you." It's a great

accusation of which God receives on your life. When I say it's parabolic, I mean I think it is a parable of everyone's life. It was -- I believe -- don't misunderstand me. I think it was a real person. I think he lived a real life. But suffering is the anvil of which every one of us is either matured or revealed, hardened, and we walk away from God.

Lisa was married 26 years. She has three children -- one happens to be in Heaven. Her daughter's death was gruesome. It was unfair. And it wrecked their family. Suffering often does. When Kerri and I were in the emergency room, or the ICU unit with our daughter, we were there for eight weeks straight, never left. We watched divorce papers being served in the ICU unit, we watched people walk out on each other, we watched people walk away from their children. I turned to my cardiologist, who was kind of the head of this whole thing, and I said, "Is this normal?" And he said, "Absolutely." And he goes, "I need a chaplain. You have to be here every day. How about you become my chaplain?" And we witnessed it. Suffering is the anvil of which either matures you or it crushes you. And Lisa, who was married for 26 years, when her daughter was murdered in a gruesome way, her boys walked away from God, her husband walked to a bottle, and she was left standing alone. And they all left her. Her husband divorced. Her boys -- they loved their mom; they just hate her God. Suffering is an anvil.

And the reason I put it in the middle of this series is because people all over the world, including Salem and Amity and Sublimity -- they suffer. Sometimes it's not much. Our suffering pales compared to what Christians woke up to this morning in Afghanistan. Our suffering pales compared to what the Christians woke up to today in Lebanon. Pales compared to what the church is facing today in Haiti. But on the other hand, your suffering is real. It really is -- and it hurts. And it has the capacity to mature you or to reveal you. And to crush you. And to harden your heart. Suffering will do one of those two things. James teaches you how to grow. And this is important stuff -- it really is. Don't tune out. I know you're hungry and I know you're hot, but do your best to tune in, because -- in all candor, if I could say in the last year, some of the most important messages that I've ever preached, this is one of them. And I will give it my absolute best. But if you don't get this one, you are so vulnerable to the enemy wiping your life out. And the reason is because when your faith is under fire -- and it will be -- God is telling you, "I want you to set a steady and a positive attitude." And the reason He says that is because the Scripture is very clear -- you can expect trials that will come in a variety of expressions. They don't come in one way -- they come in different ways, and they come at different times, and they come when you're not expecting it. And sometimes it seems like they come in this rapid form.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." What is he talking about? Well, there are trials that come your way simply because you're living in a fallen world. What's a fallen world? A world that got infected with sin. That's why we have tornados. That's why we have hurricanes. That's why we have earthquakes. Romans says that the earth is groaning, and I understand that sometimes people today in Louisiana, they're praying. And they're praying that the hurricane will go in a different direction. And the Mississippi folks, they're praying that it will go to Louisiana. And the Louisiana people are praying that it'll go to Mississippi. The reality is, I don't know who God's gonna listen to, but the fact is, you and I live in a world where bad things happen! We live in a world where there's a variety of things that come our way. They come also because there are dark forces.

I was listening to a couple of podcasts when I was on vacation, and -- well, try a couple times ten. So, a lot of podcasts. And one of them was with Eric Metaxes, and he's a brilliant writer. He wrote Bonhoeffer and a score of others -- Seven Men, Seven Women -- I would commend pretty much anything Eric writes. It's marvelous stuff. Interestingly enough, what drew him to Christ -- and he's a really, really rock-solid believer -- what drew him to Christ was what? Evil. He said, "I became convinced I witnessed evil. In my research, I saw evil." And he said, "I concluded that if there is evil, there must be good." And it began an investigation of Eric to the point that he placed his faith in Christ. But the fact is, you and I live in a world where there are dark spiritual forces. I'm not too into conspiracies, unless at the core of your conspiracy is Satan, who is orchestrating the sheer destruction of all things God loves. Now, if that's your conspiracy, I'm probably in. If you want to see chaos, Satan loves it. If you want to see divorce, Satan loves it. If you want to see churches fight over CRT [Critical Race Theory] and every other issue, Satan

loves that! So, is there a conspiracy there? Yes! Satan is at the core of all the chaos of our day, the mistrust of our day, and he is feeding it with everything he can. Yes. We live in that world.

Not only that world, but we live in a world where people are sinful. Not just a fallen world, not just a spiritually demonic world, but a world that has people where pride is a motivator, where jealousy stirs in their soul. Where unfairness is their god. Where their own personal-perceived justice is their standard. And because of that, you go to work with people who sometimes will cook the books to make their friend get a promotion and you won't. Sometimes, you will be treated unfairly. Sometimes, you won't get the right end of something. Not necessarily because there are spiritual forces in this world that are moving -- it's because there are sinful people in this world, and sometimes on that anvil rests your vocation. And then, sometimes, the trial is simply the weight of this world. Some of you go to work, and your jobs are heavy. If you work at a hospital right now, you're under a weight. If you're in the school district right now, you're under a severe weight. If you work at the State Hospital, and your job is on the line, and you're struggling over this vaccine -- there's a huge weight you face. You see, James understood that. He didn't describe it too succinctly, he just said that you can expect that trials will come in a variety of expressions, but here's the great challenge -- and I find this to be one of the most amazing challenges in the Bible -- and that is, He calls us to respond to trials with a positive attitude. He literally says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you go headlong into the midst of a battle."

Now, for the longest time in my Christian life, I just thought James was a lunatic. And that, though this was inspired by God, I thought -- "Huh. This and Ezekiel shall remain unread." Pure joy? So, Lord -- you don't want me to weep over, you don't want me to -- you know, you want me to get all happy about spiritual forces that come in and do dark things. You want me to get all happy about an earthquake that wipes out a village. You want me to wake up and read the newspaper and say, "Oh, Afghanistan -- whoa ho! Woo! That's awesome!" Well, Lord, if you want me to do that, I have to suspend all reality and the vast majority of the rest of your Scripture. What's James asking me to do? "Consider it pure joy." Well, I don't think I want to check out the rest of Scripture and say, "Huh uh -- I don't wanna grieve. Jesus was the one who grieved when His friend died." The Father's the one that, when His son died, the entire earth went dark. Mary and Martha, when their brother died, they grieved, and Jesus said, "Ha ha ha! You should be laughing! You should be filled with joy!" No. What is joy? It is not the suspension of emotions. It's not the denial of the pain, but it is a settled peace and confidence in the sovereign, good purposes of God. Pure joy is that it is the settled peaceful confidence that I am walking into the sovereign purposes of God, and in the midst of this place, there's going to be good.

As Joseph says -- Joseph Bailey -- "I will walk through the waters of the raging Jordan, and I will touch bottom, and I will discover that the ground is very firm." Why? Because I'm not in this alone. I'm not. God says, "Consider it pure joy. You're going to walk through this thing with me, and so, therefore, when your faith is under fire, remember that some lessons can only be learned through pain." They can. Perseverance must do its good work. That necessitates that I need this trial, I must walk through this. My dependence, or -- my maturity is absolutely dependent upon it, and that's why I can have a sense of joy. Why? Because my Father absolutely loves me! I don't know about you, but I'm convinced I would make a really, really pathetic God. I would. Because my children, all my children would be really, really immature. Why? Because I pray most of the time that my kids would get through the trial. I don't pray that they would be forged in the midst of the trial, and I would be looking -- if I was God, I'd be like, "No no no, I don't want you to suffer." I would forever be raising up really, really immature people! So be thankful I'm not God. Because you would be immature. But because I'm not God, and our God is God, He says that there are some things that what? You have to go through because there are some lessons you can only learn through pain.

Look at this text again. "Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its good work." What's God doing in the midst of a trial? Two things -- number one, He's heating you up to test you. He is. Not to tempt you -- to test you. What do I mean by testing? It is a place of refinement or proving. It is a place where He's refining you and making you and He's testing you, and kind of helping you to see where you're at in the whole process. I never liked tests. Even when my teacher said, "This is a helpful tool for me to know where you're at." I was, like, "I know! You

don't need to know where I'm at! I can tell you. I don't like your subject." The reality is, if she didn't test me, if he didn't test me, none of us would know where we're at. You test to prove, to reveal. And that's some of the test. When I get in the midst of the test, I kind of discover what's the strength of my faith. When I get in the midst of this test, I discover what's the maturity of my ability to forgive. And the reality is, you have no idea where you're at until God tests you. Testing does that sense of proving and revealing, and it also is a point of affirmation. Sometimes as God's maturing you in your faith, He kind of gives you a test, and you realize that -- you know what? Ten years ago, I had a similar test, and that wrecked me back then -- but today it's not! And that's God's way to say, "You're doing much better! You're growing! Your faith is stronger." And that's the beauty of a test. It not only reveals and proves, but it also affirms.

And the second thing he says is, God is heating you up to teach you. "The testing of your faith," the Scripture says, "develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete." So, what's happening in the midst of this test that you're in right now, God's maturing you. I have to remind myself. All the time. We're in the midst of this two-year-long almost kind of severe challenge where people are rage-aholics and they're mad over stuff and they walk out of relationships and they leverage their grandkids. All kinds of things! And as we're going through this -- I don't know about you, but there's times of just, like, "God, is there another planet you want me to serve on?" I know a lot of people are moving out of the state of Oregon. Are you kidding me? There's not another place that I can move, if it's on this planet, that I get off of this COVID-thing. I want to go to another planet! I'll try church-planting on Jupiter! As long as COVID doesn't get there. But the reality is, what's God teaching me? Like Paul, He's teaching me things that only suffering can teach.

Remember the Apostle Paul when he prayed -- he had a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it is. We don't know if he was blinded, we don't know if it was sexual temptation -- we don't know what it was. We don't know if it was in the body, we don't know if it's in the soul. All I do know, for absolute certain, is that Paul prayed over and over and over again, and he said, "God, would you please take it away." And God tells him why he said "no." Now, God often doesn't tell you that. But let's learn from Paul. What was the point that God said to Paul, "Paul, you have seen some of the most amazing, miraculous things -- and if I don't let this thorn in your life, you're going to drift away in pride"? What was that thorn teaching him? Dependence. "Paul, you gotta learn to stay close to God. You gotta learn that in the midst of some of the most incredible blessings you've ever received, there's a danger in blessing." If we haven't learned anything from the Nation of Israel, it's -- when they got blessed, they got distant from God. The most dangerous time in your life is when you're walking into the full blessing of God. Why? Because that's when you get independent. That's when you quit praying. That's when you feel the edge. And that's why sometimes God gives us these things. Yes. It's in the midst. It's in the midst of suffering that I learned some of the greatest things where God teaches me.

Let's focus on the second part of that text. "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete." One of the things it helps me is to think, "What I'm going through now is preparation for something that God needs in me down the road." You see, you won't get into full maturity until you're in Heaven. I won't be fully mature and glorified until I get into Heaven. But every trial that I go through is a trial that God wants to do something down the road through my life.

I remember when a young man walked into my classroom when I was a teacher. He'd been abandoned by his mom. She traded him for some cocaine. That's a hard thing to wake up one day and realize that your mom liked cocaine more than she did her son. And he's sitting in class, and it hit me -- "God, you've prepared me for this day." My mom didn't trade me for cocaine, but my dad traded me for another family. He traded my mom for another woman. He traded my daughter for another girl. And as I was sitting there with Dwain sitting next to me, I thought, "God, you trained me for this day. You seasoned me. You taught me how to trust." Our lives separated. I shared with him the gospel. I told him how God entrusted to me the life of Christ. I'm sitting in my office about three years ago, and in walks a young man that I'd shared the gospel with 30 years ago. And he never forgot. He never forgot. He found me -- of all crazy things. "You know, Mr. Hanke, it's a good thing you got a weird last name. 'Cause I knew it was you!" Yeah. You see, God's doing some things in your life right now. And He wants

to mature you, and He wants to strengthen you. Because He has some assignments for you. And when your faith is under fire, never forget that God is available to you. He says in this text that when you enter into this difficulty, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God.

Now, leave this request in the midst of the subject. What's the subject? It's trials. It's suffering. So, what's the wisdom? It's not about what college to go to. It's not about whether you should marry a person or not, unless you consider your entire marriage a trial. That might be true for some of you. Ask for wisdom. It's not wisdom about life, it's wisdom about what? The trial. And I find this fascinating. And convicting. He doesn't say, "If you're in the midst of this trial, ask God and He'll get you out!" No. In the midst of this, ask God and He will give you wisdom. And by the way, don't doubt. Don't doubt that He will give that to you. Never question the integrity of God who longs to give you what? Wisdom. Wisdom about what? The trial. You see, I find in a lot of my Christian life, the way I approach trials is, God get me through it. James teaches me, God, get me to where you need me to be -- mature.

What might it be to seek wisdom? God -- what is it that you're up to? How can I see this current difficulty from your perspective? How do you want me to rely on you more deeply in this moment so that I might fulfill and realize the maturity that you want me to get out of this class? God, would you help me to see this difficulty not from the lens of my discomfort, but rather from the perspective of a loving Father whose greatest passion is to help me look like His Son. Romans 8. That's the wisdom that you ask for. When your faith's under fire, God is available. Not to get you through it. And it's not that God doesn't want you to pray that. But the text tells you -- If you lack wisdom, if you don't know what God is up to, if you don't know how He's trying to mature you -- if you don't know what lesson He's trying to teach you -- and by the way, He's not necessarily teaching you this lesson because you're sinful, and because you just don't get it -- He's teaching you this because He has a vision for your life, and He has to strengthen you in the midst of this. And I wonder why James says, "Consider that joy." Why? Because God loves you so much and has such a vision for your life, and is so absolutely committed to that vision, that He's gonna walk you through a few trials because He knows that in the midst of these trials, He's going to forge a faith that is gonna be invincible. And when your faith is under fire, never lose sight of the prize. Never lose sight of the prize. "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, that God has promised to those who love him." No wonder James says, "Consider it joy." Consider it incredible joy.

Jack Nicholson was in somewhat crazy movie -- I think the title of it was, "As Good as It Gets." He's kind of a -- he's a writer, and he's a terribly mentally disturbed writer. And so he goes to this psychiatrist, and he comes out of this meeting with the psychiatrist and he's struggling with this whole perspective, and he comes and there's a whole bunch of people sitting in the waiting room. And he says to all of them -- "Is this as good as it gets?" And he basically sees life as -- this is miserable. In its way, it's where Job was at. Job chapter 7, as he's facing this anvil-esk moment. "I have been allotted months of futility and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down, I think, how long before I get up." In other words, I dread the idea of another morning. Ah, but Peter comes along, and he says, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." See, Peter sees the reality, but he sees a future, and Job gets there. The Lord blessed the latter days of Job's life even more than the first part. Why? Because he answered the question. "Job, why do you worship God? Is it because He's good to you? Or is it because He is good?"

"Consider it pure joy, my friends." Your life today may seem like a nightmare. You may have some huge decisions that you don't know how to make in the next few weeks. We certainly do as a school. We do as a deacon board, on the whole issue of vaccinations and everything else. Your life may seem like a nightmare. And every time our governor speaks, it feels like it gets a little more difficult. But God will make the end result more like a dream come true. Why? Because in the midst of this season, if you ask God for the wisdom, He'll let you see how He's forging in you a faith to prepare you for even greater things down the road.

Lisa lost her husband. In a tragic way, she lost her daughter. Currently her sons' faith is wrecked. And they hate her God. But tomorrow morning she's going to get up and she's going to make her way to our church. And sitting around a table is about 15 women. Their topic -- Learning to Trust God When Life Hurts. She doesn't deny the reality of the tragedy of her daughter's death. She grieves her husband's departure. She prays every day for her two boys, that they would trust God. But tomorrow, she's gonna gather these ladies and she's gonna teach them how to trust God. Why? Because in the midst of her pain and sorrow, God has forged something that is strong. And my friend, He's gonna do that in you.

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