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Slide 1 Prometheus, in Greek mythology was a Titan who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mankind. As his punishment, Zeus had Prometheus chained to a rock where everyday an eagle would arrive and peck at his body and eat his liver. And, since Prometheus was immortal, every night his liver would grow back. Zeus's intention was to leave him there for ever in a perpetual state of endless, senseless suffering.

PRAY (God is not sadistic calling us to senseless, endless suffering)

Slide 2 Rubber meets the road in life & faith with James. The question is; how shall we live as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ? Calling us to peer into the darkness, and answer in faith. Because we serve a gracious God who 'comes down' to bring us 'up'. Some have said James is a book of works and not of grace. Yet James unapologetically states the obvious; you serve a sacrificial king, who models and embodies servanthood to us. He is not saying we gain our salvation by works, but works naturally accompany faith-life.

Slide 3 True diamonds are formed over centuries, 60-125mi below the surface. Formed in a crucible of extreme temperature & pressure. They're eventually transported rapidly to the surface by volcanic eruptions to ensure they aren't converted to graphite on the journey. The lava carrying diamonds erupts at several hundred miles per hour. Diamonds the hardest gem. Graphite/Carbon, the same substance, the softest.

So, men who have bought an engagement ring, are all too painfully aware how precious and expensive diamonds are. What's my bride worth? What do I give to show my love & affection? A half formed lump of coal mounted on a setting? How would she feel? It's a love relationship, a romance. I adore her, want to declare my love; she hung the moon, she's the cream in my coffee, my cats meow. A gem deserves a gem.

Jesus is also precious. My god loved me, formed me, breathed life into my physical being, awakened me from my spiritual slumber, doesn't count my sins against me, and died for me. What does Jesus deserve? Trinkets

don't suffice. Money is fleeting. Words prove empty. My life; the only appropriate gift.

What if I tell Kim I love her, but fawn over other women? Declaring my devotion, but sharing myself with another? Making promise after promise, but treat her with contempt privately? Love would be an empty promise. Love must be accompanied by action - action & sentiment cannot be separated. Faith, based not on works, but devotion in a love relationship. Yet, so often it is revealed that we are double-minded; purporting to love Jesus, and not reflecting it. Chameleon like, we live with dual personalities depending on who we are with. Like the old American Indian image of two dogs living within our souls - one bad, one good. The one which lives is the one we feed.

A divine love affair. Devotion beyond words, songs, quiet times, bible studies, and Christian sub-culture. Devotion which trusts, knowing God will produce perseverance leading to maturity and completeness. Devotion drives us to check our hearts in all situations. A mature outlook even in the midst of crisis because we trust Jesus. God's grace carries & transforms; although the journey may be painful; diamonds formed in the crucible.

Slide 4 ²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Slide 5 Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian, was once asked by Philip Yancey, what was the greatest defect in American Christians. His answer was, 'They have an inadequate view of suffering.' A message not sufficiently preached in the Western Christian Church, maybe because we have very little experience of it. We live in a safe environment. Pennsylvania, one of the safest states to live in. Hurricanes peter out before they get to the northeast, almost no tornadoes, very little of our flora & fauna bite, stick, or sting. Healthcare; some of the best in the world. A Clorox sterile environment keeping sickness at bay. Cars marketed on safety. Highly educated, cocooned in a financial protective bubble. Sanitized. Why speak of suffering, but do everything to avoid it - and when experienced, we think something is drastically wrong.

Slide 6 My allergist told me once of the the Hygiene Hypothesis, first put forth in 1989 by Dr David Strachan in the British Medical Journal. His research showed that hay fever, eczema, and other allergies were far less common in children with many siblings. He postulated that this was due to the children being naturally exposed to many more pathogens and allergens by living in close quarters with a larger number of people. The theory has been used to show why allergies and immune disorders have been on the rise since the Industrial Revolution and have a much higher occurrence in developed countries. As research has grown, the hypothesis has also been applied to agents other than allergens. Basically, sanitized societies produce people more susceptible to allergies and other sicknesses.

If the Hygiene Hypothesis is true, then it would be a brilliant example of a desire to avoid suffering, actually causing long-lasting suffering. So go out and eat some dirt, you may feel better.

Our world view puts the individual at the center, which seeps into our faith. My safety is the most important thing in the world. We've grown cold to each others dilemmas. I must do this myself, can't let anyone know my true feelings, my inability to cope – pull up the boot straps, make it on my own. **Slide 7** Vulnerability isn't an option. I can't let anyone see I am hurting. We don't share one another's burdens. Embarrassed to allow others into our suffering, even if it's legitimate. Only when our 'rights' are stepped on do we come out swinging, 'You cannot do that to me, I have rights!' A self-centered prideful reaction; individualistic.

James isn't addressing suffering due to our perceived rights as Americans being stepped on. He isn't talking of suffering our sinful behaviors cause. Or victimhood. **Slide 8** James refers here to trials due to our coming under the Lordship of Christ, or the hardships we face that we have no control over; death, sickness, poverty, the outward things of life which just happen. And to those things he says, consider it pure joy! Why? Opposite of what we're taught - suffering means something's wrong; it's not as it should be! That may very well be true, we all long for that promise of every tear being wiped away. But, in the meantime, living in the in between of the fulfillment of God's Kingdom, it happens, and God uses trials for betterment.

Slide 9 James is concerned with our response to life under grace. God is not as concerned with comfort, or even happiness, as much as spiritual growth & maturity. Job, after losing his children and wealth, his wife encouraged him to curse God and die. He said, "Should we accept good from God but not adversity?" "Mature, complete, lacking nothing", the goal of life's trials. Paul "labored strenuously to preach and teach so that he might present us perfect/complete in Christ." (Col 1:27) Perfection, not sinlessness, but rather character brought to completion; growing up as we grow old. Then and only then will we understand Paul's attitude in prison, or Stephen's when being stoned.

Slide 10 In facing trials we usually have a number of different reactions:

Fear – What will become of me?

Anger – How can they do that to me?

Self-pity – Won't somebody feel sorry for me?

Envy of others – Why aren't they suffering like I am?

Confusion – Why is this happening to me?

Slide 11 When these are our only reactions we often fall into the problems James addresses:

A jealous focus on material wealth

A selfish neglect of others' needs

A judgmental spirit and hurtful speech

A bitter fighting with one another

Slide 12 In Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Model there are 5 stages of grief, a descriptive, not prescriptive, model looking at trauma or trials in life:

Denial - "I feel fine."; "This can't be happening, not to me."

Anger - "Why me? It's not fair!"; "How can this happen to me?"

Bargaining - "I'll do anything if this were different."; "I will give my life savings if..."

Depression - "Why bother?"; "Nothing works, what's the point?"

Acceptance - "It's going to be okay."; "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it."

Therefore, in trials, we should expect these feelings, they're normal. **Slide 13** But what James is saying, “⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.”¹ Holding onto Truth, choosing joy while experiencing suffering. It may feel like God has abandoned, but Truth carries us through, producing perseverance, maturity, and hope.

In following Christ we become self-sacrificial, mourning over our sin, seeking to serve, considering the needs of others, all contrary to what we're taught. **Slide 14** We are an extreme blessing, and a loving confrontation to the worldview of others. Convicting & challenging; soothing & spurring. Christians, rejoicing in suffering, confuse & attract.

Slide 15 Happiness is a subjective state, whereas joy is an objective choice based on Truth. Happiness speaks of a cheerful mood connected with outward circumstances. Joy goes deeper; rooted in truth and future hope. Joy understands the reason behind suffering, happiness is only found in positive circumstances. Facing the worst we choose joy. Crap happens, but God is not afraid to get His hands dirty.

Slide 16 We need to look into the spiritual dynamics of our trials to understand testing. Testing not in the sense of pass/fail, but going deeper into Christ-likeness. Growth. In testing we think of being measured on knowledge already in us; pass/fail. James calls us beyond already obtained knowledge and into character development; something not yet formed in us. Suffering, like the sponge that soaks up Truth, allowing it to get into the very fiber of our being. Much more than knowledge; life-experience. Theoretical knowledge falls flat in trials - life must be developed and solidified in trial.

Remember Exodus 3, God hears the suffering of his people and comes down to bring them up. We don't pass a test, rather God is at work in us to

¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (2 Co 4:8–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

produce maturity. We rejoice because God is considering us, loving us enough to allow us to experience pain which makes us complete.

Slide 17 My wife is brilliant, she allows life to happen to our kids; to play at risk and even get hurt. She doesn't run to the doctor for a sniffle or common cold - she let's them ride it out. She doesn't spoil. Often times we as parents seek to coddle, creating such a safe and happy environment for our kids that they don't develop maturity. We give them what they want when they scream for it. We don't allow them to play hard and get a scrape. We don't allow their immune systems to strengthen. We don't discipline and scold when they do wrong. Parental insecurity says our kids will hate us if we don't over-protect or discipline them. The opposite is true - later they will resent us for not allowing them to fail and make mistakes. We will not have prepared them for life. Allowing a kid to fail and deal with the consequences in a controlled environment with clear direction produces maturity. God is a loving parent to allow us to experience pain. When we are tested we should be encouraged God is working, yet we think He abandons, or finds sadistic pleasure in our pain; not true.

Suffering in faith, produces perseverance. It solidifies. I've wanted to give up due to testing at times, God wouldn't allow it – working in me, not taking the pressure off, forcing me to deal with my heart and developing my spiritual immune system. **Slide 18** Even when the attacks came from within the body of Christ, and I felt like David when he wrote in Psalm 55:12-14 'If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the House of God.' Even trials within the Body form maturity; and we realize that our brother or sister is not our enemy even when they act like it. Our own indignation and anger will not produce what God desires, but testing will produce perseverance leading to maturity. **Slide 19** A healthy Christian has a soft heart enclosed in the skin of an elephant - the arrows of crisis bounce off. But only experience coupled with Truth, will produce that, otherwise we are the opposite. Soft skinned & a hard-hearted; easily hurt, angry, bitter, & always the victim.

James envisions our future maturity & completion. Under Grace growing without threat of condemnation - not pass/fail - room for mistakes. Am I properly concerned about my reaction in trial? Do I care about others? Do I love others even when they strike me? Am I sacrificial or selfish? Will I succumb to sin, or walk in obedience? Grow up, or play the victim? Trials force these questions, and God develops perseverance & maturity. Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?' God said to Moses, 'I'm with you.' God accompanies. Working within you, not left alone to endure.

Slide 20 ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶But 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. ⁷That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man (**double-souled**), unstable in all he does.

James says ask for wisdom and not doubt, because he is reminding of who they serve, a sacrificial god who loves and cares for them in their suffering. Not double-souled. Not serving two masters; our will and his. Believing lies all week and proclaiming Truth on Sunday. We must serve our king with full assurance that he comes running to us like the father running to the prodigal son - but that does not necessarily mean he will turn off the pain, which is all we really want Him to do. Wisdom for James is practical. When faced with a trial, suffering, or temptation we simply ask. God is listening and willing to pour it out on us. An assurance to face fearful situations I have little confidence in, God is there behind the veil, close, and in control.

Slide 21 James goes farther, "⁹The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position. 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."²

² *The New International Version*. 2011 (Jas 1:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Those in humble circumstances have an advocate. God knows it's a dog eat dog world, and the poor are wearing milk-bone underwear! In times of trial the wealthy run to wealth, status & power; where they put their trust. It's never failed them. But, James says it comes and goes. In the dry places of Palestine, just after a quick rain, shoots would sprout, but this harsh wind and hot Palestinian sun would devastate it within an hour. Just look at the stock market in recent history, it tanked, fortunes lost in minutes.

Rudyard Kipling once advised a group of students not to make money, power, or fame their goals. For one day they would meet a man who did not care for these things. He said, "Then you will know how poor you are." Significance isn't gained through money, power, or prestige. **Slide 22** Rich & poor are equally significant; Christ the great equalizer. Lee Atwater, successful by the world's standards, was campaign manager for George Bush Sr. in the 1988 US presidential election, and was later diagnosed with brain cancer. He reflected on his life and said this, "The 80's were about acquiring- acquiring wealth, power, and prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty inside. What power would I not trade for more time with my family? What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with my friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with this truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambition and moral decay, can learn on my dime."

Slide 23 ¹²Blessed 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." Something greater to aim for; maturity & completion in Christ. We can enjoy inner peace and joy with Christ now and future benefits we cannot yet see. We follow in wait of answers - not obedience after we get answers and only if we like them. In perseverance God transforms & we mature. When diamonds are brought to the surface they could face obstacles, go too slow and turn to graphite; the hardest gem turned to soft carbon. Trials, the pressure forming the stone. God, the lava lifting us up. By obedience we allow Jesus to transport us through trials rapidly forming a gem. Yet we naturally fight the process and become soft. **Slide 24** Not everyone who grows old grows up. The choice: submit to Jesus, or spiral downward into the self-centeredness & victimhood.

Fear – What will become of me?

Anger – How can they do that to me?

Self-pity – Won't somebody feel sorry for me?

Envy of others – Why aren't they suffering like I am?

Confusion – Why is this happening to me?

Slide 25 Take criticism, work through issues, ask for wisdom, love despite the slaps, allow God to form you. You'll be a soft-hearted elephant; a gem worth giving to your first love; Jesus. You are not Prometheus in endless senseless suffering under a vengeful god. You are under grace being formed in the crucible.