

James: The Christian and Trials

James 1:2-18

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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 that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 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 is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich 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 blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. 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. When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He write His eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

"Our Lord we ask that from Your word, you would teach us how we ought to respond to the trials of this life. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."

With Christians around the world dying for their faith, being exiled for their faith,

enduring slavery for their faith and all manner of persecutions, many of us are ready to admit that we don't know much about deep trials. But, some of us think of our lives as filled with hardship and trials. I read a letter to the editor yesterday, and it recorded a word of thanks to the newspaper from a gentleman who was clearly a fan of cars, for running an article on classic cars. But, even in his letter, you could tell that he could think back on a trail that endured some forty years ago. Let me summarize the letter for you:

"I appreciated your article on classic cars. It brought back memories. Many years ago as a young man I had a "61" and a "64" Corvette. But, marriage and graduate school caused me to give them up. I still have the wife, the degree and the memories. But, nothing will ever replace those cars."

Now, I suspect he's sleeping outside this morning. But, clearly this man feels that he has gone through a deep trial, to part with those cars. Even forty years later he's thinking about those cars. Such are some of the trials that we endure. On the other hand, there are plenty of people in this room who have been called to go through deep waters. Some of you have reared a child to see the day that grown child lying before you gone home. You've suffered the infidelity of a spouse. You've lost employment at a critical juncture in your life and the life of your family. You know what it is to have a friend betray you. You've heard a chilling medical diagnosis from your friend and doctor. You've experienced a wrecked family relationship, one for which there was very little hope of remedy. You've been involved in the long term care of a family member with a debilitating and ultimately terminal illness. And the list could go on and on.

In fact, there is no such thing as a Christian immune from trials. It is a good thing, certainly, to put our trials in perspective, to realize that there are some who have been called to go through things far more difficult than we have been called to go through. But, there is never a necessity to belittle our trial. In fact, it may not be beneficial at all to belittle our trials. God does not belittle those trials. He treasures up the tears of His people, He tells us in the book of Revelation. And the way we cope with trials is not to belittle them, to make light of them, to pretend like they don't matter much, because they do matter much. But, the way we cope with our trials is to put them in biblical perspective and to obey what God's word says we ought to do in the circumstance of trials. And that's precisely what James is about in this passage.

James is concerned that we learn three or four very important things about trials. As he speaks to us in God's Word today. I'm going to outline the passage for you. In verses 2-4, James will set forth his principles about dealing with trials. Then in verses 5-8, he will talk with us about wisdom in the midst of trials. In verses 9-11, he'll give us an illustration of why we need wisdom in the midst of trials. And then in verses 12-18, on the one hand, he will give us a glorious promise about the goal of trials in God's plan. And he'll also give us a warning about responding to trials in the wrong way. Those are the four things that I'd like

to look at with you this morning.

I. The trials of Christian's lives, all of them, serve God's purpose of maturation.

First, look at verses 2-4. Here, James says something really astonishing. Don't reject what he says out of hand. He says that trials are useful. In verses 2-4, James is speaking of the usefulness of trials. He is saying that trials in Christians lives, all of them, serve God's purpose of maturation. In other words, trials serve to grow us up in grace. James' words are astounding. When he says to you, "Consider it all joy my friends, when you encounter various kinds of trials. When he says that to you, that might sound astounding. It may sound unrealistic. It may sound like syrupy gospel songs that say that once you know Jesus, you are happy all the day long, and you're looking around and you're wondering, "Is everybody around me happy all the day long? Nobody around me. I'm the only one who's struggling with this discouragement. I'm the only one struggling with this situation in my life that's never going to go away." James' words may sound like that, but don't write him off. When he says consider it all joy, I want you to understand that his words are brutally realistic and they're as helpful as the day is long.

James is not presenting in these verses a secret that he alone knows. James is not starting a self help seminar where he travels the country selling his book for \$9.95 and the tape packages are thrown in for an extra donation of \$21.95 to give you the secret of dealing with trials, a secret that he alone knows. In fact, if you look at the first word of verse 3, he's telling you here that he's going to teach you something that you already know. "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." In other words, you already know what I'm about to tell you. If you're a believer, you know that what I'm going to tell you is true and important. He's calling us not to believe some new secret that he's discovered. He is calling us here to believe and act on something that we all ready know. And James probably has in mind here, especially the persecution that these Christian's were going to face, persecutions of various kinds. But he explicitly makes his words generally applicable here, when he says, consider it all joy when you experience or undergo what? Various trials. He's including all manner of trials and tribulations in his general counsel here.

And notice what James says we should do. If you follow verse 2-4, you will see James give a four part counsel to a person who's enduring trials. Go to verse 4 and work backwards, because in verse 4, he tells you the purpose of trials. And that's where we start and then we work back to what we do in the presence of trials. In verse 4, notice what he says: he tells you what the revealed purposes of God are in trials. What are they? To make you perfect, so that you will be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. God is conspiring in trials to make you perfect,

so that when you stand before Him on the last day, you are as sinless as His Son, Jesus. It's mind boggling isn't it? God's grand conspiracy for you is to make you perfect like Jesus. James says, that's where you start in thinking about trials. Everything that is going on in your life is part of God's grand conspiracy to make you like Jesus, to present you before Him perfect. Then you work back to verse 3.

Having told you the revealed purposes of God in verse 4, James tells you the revealed means of God accomplishing His purpose, the instrument that He uses to produce your perfection. What is it? Testing, the testing of your faith. It produces perseverance or endurance in that faith. So the goal is perfection. The instrument is testing.

What is the proving ground, the setting, the terrain of that testing? He tells you in verse 2. What is it? Trial. The goal is perfection; the means is testing, proving faith to make it endure. What is the terrain, what's the testing ground, what's the setting for testing the faith? Affliction, trial, struggle, pain, suffering, that is the terrain the proving ground for God's test. And what is the response that we are then to have to that testing? Joy. You can't get to the response until you understand the end. You can't get to the end except through the means. You can't get to the means except on the proving ground. And you can't have the joy unless you understand the other three.

James has set before you a formula that he wants to be worked into our hearts so that it becomes second nature. Frankly, it's easier to deploy these truths in the difficult test of life, than it is in the mundane test, because we think that we can handle the mundane test, or we are not as reflective about the mundane test. But James says this is how we are to respond to trials.

Now, notice that what he says is exactly opposite of our instinctive response. Our instinctive response to trial, first of all, is to question the secret purposes of God. We immediately ask, "Why? Why is this happening to me? Why are You allowing this to happen?" Notice what we do; we go to the secret purposes of God and start asking all kinds of questions about it. There are stacks of books on the shelves of Christian book stores doing precisely that, asking questions that you and I will never be able to answer about the secret purposes of God. The most famous of them is about 20 years old, but it's still popular, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. Now it gives a horrendously bad answer, I want to say right quick, but it's asking the wrong question to begin with.

James says that when you're in the midst of trials you don't ask a question about the secret purposes of God. You ask a question about the revealed purposes of God. What He's already told you in His word that He's doing in your life. You don't have to figure that one out. God's told you in black and white. But, what do we do? We want to know "Why? What's going on?" We don't understand the cosmic ends of the universe. We don't understand the details of God's counsel.

Of course you don't, you're not God. The secret things belong to the Lord, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children and to our children's, children. James says don't try and work out the secret plan of God; go to His revealed purposes.

The second thing we do in trial is that we immediately are tempted to doubt the goodness and wisdom of God. "Lord, how could you do this to a nice person like me?" Or, "I just don't understand what's going on, this doesn't make any sense. It doesn't seem like a wise plan based on what is happening to me." We instinctively doubt the goodness and wisdom of God. James says, "No, you go back and you remember that the way that God brings about His goal in you, is by testing."

Thirdly, we then respond generally by throwing up our arms and quitting, spiritually speaking. Whereas, James says, remember that the affliction is the occasion of God's testing. It's not a time to throw up your arms and quit spiritually. It's a time to believe and then what do we do?

Fourthly, we get bitter. James says, "No, you rejoice!" Do you see how totally opposite James words of counsel are to our typical response to trial? James wants us to consider trial a matter of rejoicing, and you can only do that by following the words of verses 2-4, and you need wisdom, which is what he talks about in verses 5-7. You see, trials serve to test the genuineness of faith to produce endurance in our faith and to bring about the maturity that God desires in us. And so trials serve the purpose of Grace. Grace grows best in winter, Rutherford, once said. Why did he say that? Because, it's in the afflictions of life that God grows us most in grace.

II. What the Christian needs in order to rejoice in trial is wisdom.

Now, James in verses 5-8 goes on to speak about wisdom. And let me just stop right here and say, as you read through James 1:2-18, you may ask yourself a question, when you get to verse 5-8 and 9-11, and that question may go something like this: "I don't have the slightest idea how trials, wisdom, wealth and poverty provide a consecutive train of thought. I know that he must be talking about trials in general, because he speaks about them explicitly in verses 2-4 and explicitly in verses 12-18. But, what's the deal with wisdom and wealth and poverty in the middle? They seem to be sandwiched in, it seems like he's going on a rabbit trail. How do they fit together?"

Let me try and help you here. In verses 5-8, James is talking about the trial of guidance, or maybe we could even say, he's talking about guidance in trials. And, he's telling us that what the Christian needs in order to rejoice in trial is wisdom.

Now, how does that relate to what he's just been talking about? Well, it relates

like this: by showing us the need for wisdom in response to trials. Now, wisdom is a very rich biblical concept. Our friend, Derek Thomas, has written an entire book on biblical wisdom, and I commend it to you. But here is all I want you to understand about wisdom in this particular verse. In verse 5, when James says that we need wisdom and that if we lack wisdom we can ask God for it, he means simply this: that wisdom here means looking at life as James told you to in verses 2-4. That's the first part of wisdom that James is talking about. You need to look at life in the categories, from the framework, through the grid that he has described in verses 2-4. That's the first mark of godly, divine, heavenly wisdom.

The second aspect, of wisdom that James is speaking about here, is making decisions to move forward on the pathway of spiritual maturity that are in accord with God's word. So, when you are in the middle of a trial, you're looking at the trial and you're looking at life as he's told you in verses 2-4 to look at it, and you are moving forward in your spiritual growth in accordance with what the Bible teaches. Those parts of wisdom are what James is talking about in verses 5-7. And he says, "If you lack that wisdom, I promise you that God will give it to you. All you have to do is ask." This is an unconditional declaration by James. If you lack that wisdom and you want to be able to look at your problems like James 1:2-4 says, but you're just not looking at them that way. And you want to make wise spiritual decisions based upon God's word, but you just don't seem to be able to find the energy to do so, or you just don't seem to be able to relinquish your own desires to interpret everything, and explain everything. Then, James says, "Here's what you need to do - pray. Ask the Father to give you that kind of wisdom. Not the kind of wisdom that lets you figure out all the secret things of God, but, the kind of wisdom that enables you to believe what God said in His word. He will give it to you."

III. The Christian's view of wealth and poverty is a window to his wisdom.

Now, immediately in verses 6-8, James speaks of two human factors that can short cut your peace in the midst of trials, and I want to point you to them. He speaks of doubt and he speaks of double mindedness. Look at what he says. "He must ask in faith without doubting. For the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For a man ought not to expect that he will receive anything the Lord being a double minded man, unstable in all his ways."

Doubt and double mindedness are signs of worldliness. Doubt here is doubt of God's word. Doubt of what James has already taught. Double mindedness is a person who's trying to live in two worlds at the same time; this present world which will pass away, and the age to come, which God has already established in the hearts of His people and the communion of the saints. And the person who is double minded both wants the goals and desires of this world and the goals and desires of the kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ, at the same time.

Jesus said you cannot serve God and mammon. You can't do it. And so James is saying, if you have twin desires operating here, you will be frustrated in dealing with trials. When you come up with the losses of this life, if you are counting this life as ultimate, you're not going to get peace. It's only if you are single minded and you have given yourself over to the age to come, if you have given yourself over to the kingdom our Lord Jesus Christ, that you're able to put the trials of this world in perspective. But, as long as you're double minded, as long as you doubt God's word you will not get peace. And it is that peace and wisdom that we need. It's that wisdom that shows the vigor of our trust in God in the midst of trial. It's that wisdom that shows itself in our prayers that we pray, in response to trial.

What the Christian needs, in order to rejoice in trial, is wisdom. And that's why James speaks of it in verses 5-8. Then he gives an illustration of this in practice, when he talks about wealth and poverty in verses 9-11. Look with me there. You see, he's talking about the trial of poverty and wealth. Now, everybody is lining up on this side saying, "Lord give me the trial of wealth, please." But, James wants you to see both of those worldly imposters, poverty and wealth, for what they are.

You see the poor man could very easily fixate on dissatisfaction with his situation, and, he could think that life was going to get better if he only had what he didn't have. And he doesn't realize that he's been made rich in Jesus Christ and that there's nothing greater that God could give that what He's already given. And so James tells us here, the relatively poor Christian man could very easily fixate on dissatisfaction with his situation. But wisdom does what? It leads him, instead of being dissatisfied, to glory in his situation, realizing that he may be poor in the sight of this world, but he is rich in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the rich man could look at his situation and could become so satisfied with the gifts that he has, that he forgets the giver. He could fall so in love with the gifts that he has, that he foregoes the gift of the giver. He could think that these things, these toys, these precious monies and material things, these are the most important things, and though in reality very frivolous, he could fall in love with them, instead of those things that are eternal. The rich Christian could easily delight in his riches, rather than realizing that God has surrounded him with things that will ultimately pass away.

And so prosperity is a trial. In fact, Spurgeon says there is no trial like prosperity. And a comparison of Christianity in the prosperous countries with Christianity in countries where Christians are not prosperous, bears that out. The quality of our Christianity is severely tested by prosperity. And if we are truly wise, we will see that both wealth and lack are trials designed to grow us.

And so James illustrates this principle of single mindedness even from wealth and poverty. And he could have done it in a lot of ways. He could have contrasted loneliness and companionship. He could have contrasted a person who experiences the unexpected bereavement of a spouse with a person who

has a long, happy married life. He could have contrasted unemployment as opposed to fulfilling work, or disappointed hopes with fulfilled hopes. He could have gone on and on. The contrasts are all out there. But this is a reminder that our response to lack and to plenty, wherever it may be in life, reveals to us our true attitudes and whether we have real wisdom. If we're truly wise, we will see both plenty and want as trials designed to grow us.

IV. There is certain blessing in store for the enduring Christian.

And then, one last thing, in verses 12-18. James makes a categorical pronouncement about the goal of God's work in us. He says, "Blessed is the man who preserves under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." When James says that, he is saying something to us as believers that God has said to believers ever since Genesis chapters 2 and 3. God has taught believers since creation to live their lives in light of a foreseeable good. To live their lives knowing that God is going to do them good in the last day, that He's going to reward them with his glorious promise. We're not to live life like the pagans, who think life is good and then you die. Or fill your life up with toys, because then you die, or whatever, because there's nothing that comes after it. We're to live our lives in light of the conscience good that God has promised us, in His word.

And then he says, in verses 13 —18, that we are to resist the temptation to fix blame on God or to think that in our trials God is tempting us to evil. In this passage James is not denying that God has anything to do with trials in this life. He is, however, categorically denying that God intends by trials, to press you into sin. He says, "No, God's intentions are always," verse 12, "to perfect you for the day of glory and reward." That is always God's purpose in trials.

Now, where does the sin and evil come from? Ah, that comes from you. It comes from your heart. It comes from wrong desires. And he says, "Don't be deceived." Look at verses 16-18. Don't be deceived as you are trying to figure out your trials. Don't do like Eve did. You remember, Satan said to Eve, and to Adam, God isn't telling you the truth. God really doesn't have your best interests in mind. He's wanting to hold something back from you. God is being parsimonious in His dealings with you. He's really not giving you the best that He could give. And James is saying, don't fall for that one.

When you encounter trials don't think that it's a stingy God, who doesn't have your best interests in mind, who is behind that trial. God's purposes are always good. James says, "Every good gift in this life comes from above, it comes from God." Every single good that we experience comes from Him, and that controls how we look at our trials and our sufferings. When God calls us to be perfected through suffering in trials, my friends, He is only calling us to go the way of His only begotten Son. Hebrews 5:8 says, "He learned obedience through that which

He suffered.” And so, if we are to navigate trials lightly, we must doggedly cling to two truths: the goodness of God and the purpose of God in our trials, because, affliction is the medicine of grace in the hands of God. Let us pray.

“Our Lord and our God we need grace and affliction, grant it to us we pray, even as You grant us to trust Your goodness and plan, in Jesus' name. Amen.”

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