

Experiencing Trials

James 1

By Dr. Sinclair Ferguson

Please open your Bibles to the Epistles of James, and as you turn there, let me express my appreciation of Dr. Duncan's welcome, and say to you, some of you who are old enough probably to remember the last time I was at this Rally last century sometime, that it's a tremendous privilege to be invited back. To be invited once to anything is special; to be invited back, even though it be at such a distance that most of those who were here have forgotten who I was, so that now my sermons are being given away free...that's about the most disconcerting introduction I've ever had in a Presbyterian church!

But it is...I hope it's as thrilling for you as it is for those who organized this evening to be men together, or boys together again, singing the praises of our great Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now, God's word in the opening chapter of the letter of James, and we're going to read the first section:

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds; for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness or perseverance have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial; for when he has stood the test

he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. And then desire when it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures." [While there is some division of opinion as to where we should demarcate a transition here, some scholars suggest that this section ends tellingly with the words, "Know this, my beloved brothers."]

Our Father, as we turn together to place our minds and our hearts and wills, our affections and emotions, the whole of our being, under the authority of Your word, listening to the voice of Jesus Christ, needing the illumination of Your Holy Spirit, we pray that You would come upon us as a gathering of men, and bow us down under the grace and goodness of Your word; that we may engage in dialogue of soul with You this evening, and dialogue of praise to You, as we wait to hear what Christ the Lord has to say to us. And this we pray for His great name's sake. Amen.

I have chosen as the theme of our two studies this evening, as you will have seen from the program, the title *Experiencing Trials and Overcoming Sin*. And there are several reasons for doing this, some of which are obvious to us: that we are all men who, from time to time, know what it is to experience trials, and indeed, to come to understand that in many different ways the whole of the Christian life is a trial in which we are being tested for the next stage of our growth in Christian grace and suffering, that we either all face or know others to whom we must minister (sometimes the more difficult task), who are facing suffering.

But there is another reason, partly personal to myself, but extrapolating to you from my personal experience. The other reason is this: that facing trials and overcoming sin are two areas of the Christian life that most of us recognize we are not experts in fulfilling. And we need the word of God; we need the teaching of the sacred Scriptures to help us to be 'steadfast' to use the expression of James, men whose characters have been so transformed by the truth of the gospel and the way in which we have responded to the providences of God that, as James hints to us here, instead of crumbling under both trial and temptation, we are actually strengthened through both, and become the kind of men to whom even the ungodly can look with awe and recognize that something supernatural has happened in this person, so to transform his life into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

And it's obvious in this wonderful letter of James, which I rather suspect is one of the earliest, if not actually the earliest, part of the New Testament to be written, that as he sees those perhaps whom he once pastored in Jerusalem and in the surrounding villages who have come to faith in Jesus Christ dispersed through the persecution of the early days of the Christian church, and now far from him, it's a very telling thing that the

burden on his heart is a burden first of all that they may grow to maturity through the experiences of difficulty into which God has been leading them; and indeed, it's apparent from the very thing that he says here in verse 4 that he is looking for maturity of character that will stand the fiery trials of life, and at the end, as he says, receive the crowning of the life of grace at the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're going to look this evening at two separate parts of the New Testament not obviously related, but as we do so we shall see how this theme of facing trials and overcoming temptation runs like a thin red line, like a symphonic motif, through these passages to help us better grasp the gospel and to grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in this passage, rather obviously, James addresses the question of how you respond to trials, and how you deal with temptation...how you respond to trials, how you and I deal with temptation.

He speaks first of all, you notice in verse 2, about trials. "We all," he says, "my brothers, we all meet trials of various kinds..."—trials of different hues, multi-colored trials. If we were to spend time examining this letter, we would get all kinds of different clues as to the specifics of the trials that these Christians were going through. But James is less interested in the specifics of the trials than this principle in general that Christians experience trials of different sorts, trials of different kinds of power that come to them in different seasons of life, that come in different shades and hues and forums—in this letter, trials of deprivation, trials of persecution, trials of personal affliction.

And James, who, from one point of view, seems to be the most rigorous author in the New Testament, astonishingly opens his letter by saying, "Brethren, count it all joy when you meet these various kinds of trials..." In other words, he is saying the gospel has not fully wrought maturity into me until I am able to see the trials of life as a source of joy in my Christian experience. Not, obviously, that he is encouraging us to be masochists who take pleasure in pain; but he is encouraging us so to see the economy of God in the trials of life through which we go that in the midst of those trials, rather than crumble or become lugubrious, we actually rejoice: not rejoice only when they are over, able now to arise and to praise God because they are past, but actually to joy in God, and in His grace and in His sovereign purpose at the very moment we are going through the trials. Any individual, you might say, is able to rejoice because trials are over, but it takes supernatural transformation to have joy in the midst of trials. And it is, he says, possible for the Christian believer to have joy in the midst of trials only when the Christian believer comes to understand what those trials are going to produce in his life.

And so, he says, "Count it all joy, brothers...that the testing of your faith through these trials may produce in you perseverance, or steadfastness." I suppose the simplest way to grasp what he is talking about here is to picture one of those amazing Olympic weightlifters picking up those bars with such enormous weights on them that the very bar itself bends as they pick it up, snatching it up above their heads and holding it there, as their whole body quivers under the pressure...and standing firm, whatever the weight is placed upon their lives.

Now, that is exactly the language that James uses here. It's the ability to take the strain, take the pressure, and to stand firm in a godly way. And the fascinating thing that James is underlining for us is that that, like the weightlifter, can be produced in us only by lifting weights. There is no other way in the divine economy to build that kind of steadfastness and perseverance into my life without pressure, without trials, without afflictions; there is no other way to strengthen the muscular kind of our Christianity than to test it to the full. And so James is saying to these Christians who, presumably, are beginning to discover affliction that is causing them pain, that they need to see the strategic function of suffering, and trial and affliction, and persecution and deprivation in the Christian life...because without it there is no true greatness in Christian living. Without it, the world will not see the difference in Christian believers, because the great difference that he is concerned about in the last analysis is this: that the evidence of my Christian character is more likely to be seen in my reactions than in my actions.

I am in control ordinarily of my actions, and can manipulate them; but it's my reactions to the unexpected, to the trial, to the difficulty, to the affliction, to the deprivation...it's the reaction that demonstrates what is really there in my soul. James is marvelously wanting to encourage these Christians in such a way that that kind of steadfastness will be produced in them.

Ligon Duncan mentioned a moment ago *The Shorter Catechism*. If you knew me well, you would know that probably the story above all American stories I love is the story that B. B. Warfield tells about *The Shorter Catechism*, describing a situation in the Midwest, I think, in the days of nineteenth century war, days of enormous confusion. In some Midwest town filled with rioting, and a man walking down the street of such singular possession in the midst of the confusion that people were actually turning round and staring at him; and a stranger in town watching him walk down the street as people were drawn to him as to a magnet; and the man, remembering how his mother had told him never to stare at strangers, is ready for the moment when the man will pass him by so that he can keep staring ahead. But instead, he finds himself drawn like a magnet to stare at this man, and as he turns round and stares at him, he realizes the man has stopped and turned round and is staring at him, and is now coming up to him; and pressing him in the chest, says to him, "What is the chief end of man?" And somewhat relieved, because he had re-memorized *The Shorter Catechism*, he said, "Why, it is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." And the stranger said to him, "You know, I knew you must be a *Shorter Catechism* boy by your looks." And the man said, "You know, that's exactly what I was thinking about you!"

That's a deep reality, you know...or at least, it used to be: that you could be recognized as a Christian by the way you responded to crisis. And this is what James is looking for. At the end of the day, he is not concerned openly with the actions of these Christians in the sense of their pragmatic 'get up and go'; he is interested in seeing the gospel produce what our society cries out to see: that is, lives that are radically different, and shine in the midst of dark and difficult circumstances.

And of course, the great question that he addresses then is, "What do I need if I'm

going to be that kind of man, who is able to face difficulties and dark circumstances in this way?" And it's very interesting to see how, as James works his way through this, James is a man who is obviously saturated in the teaching of the Old Testament, and sometimes a little like places in the Book of Proverbs—it's difficult to see what's going on in his mind that connects one statement with the other. I want us to try and see how he answers their and our question, "How can this steadfastness, this perseverance, be produced in me? What do I need?"

And, you notice, he mentions three things. The first is this, in verses 5-7: I need wisdom that comes from a God who gives generously. I need wisdom that comes from a God who gives generously. I need the kind of wisdom about which the psalmist speaks in Psalm 119, that God gave him wisdom from His word that made him wiser than his enemies, and better instructed than his teachers. And you remember how, right in the middle of that psalm, he gives a marvelous illustration of how that wisdom works when he says, "I now see it was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might no longer go astray." When he sees that God has used the trials of his life like a great warning sign in his way, and then has used the trials of his life to begin to mold and shape his life and purify his life, as though it had been cast into a furnace to be cleansed, and to come forth as pure gold...and that's the kind of wisdom, he says, God gives—and never reluctantly.

You see why this is such an important thing to grasp. When life is confused, and confusing, and days are dark, that God, who gives you wisdom... you begin to see that He has a gracious purpose in all that He is doing, is a God who gives that wisdom generously. I am more and more convinced that the greatest lie the devil injects into the hearts of God's people is that our God is ungenerous to us. And we're like disciples in the boat coming to Him and saying, 'Look at what's happening! Don't You care that we are perishing?' And of course, that was the very reason the Savior was in the boat: because He cared they were perishing. A generous God, who gives wisdom.

And you see, we never, as James goes on to demonstrate to us, actually...we never make real progress in our Christian life unless we get through this barrier to the point where our souls are being bathed in this great principle of God's revelation in creation and in redemption: 'I am a generous Father and a gracious God. I give Myself to you; I demonstrate My love for you; I have a passion for you.'

The man in the street, of course, believes that's the kind of God he believes in. He believes in a generous God...and he's lying through his teeth when he tells you that...but he would not live with such despoil to this God if he believed He was an infinitely generous God.

But you, you profess to believe in a generous God. Do you and I really believe in the overwhelming generosity of God? Then, you see, we begin to see the difficulties and trials of life in their proper frame, and the picture changes. You know, you have a picture and you take it along to a master framer, and you say, 'Is there anything you can do with this picture?' And he tells you there's nothing wrong with the picture; the problem is

with the frame. And once he has done his masterly work, you take it home and the family say[s], 'What did he do to the picture?' And you say, 'He did nothing to the picture. It's the new way it's framed that makes it seem to marvelously different.' So in the life of the Christian believer.

James is saying, 'If you're ever going to grow in this kind of endurance, have this kind of stickability in the face of difficulties, what you need to know, what you need to frame all the experiences of your life with, is an absolute conviction based on the promise of God that He is a generous God, and that He will give you the wisdom that you need to be able to understand the purposes that He has in your life. And He's doing something through you. He's investing in you. And so he says, 'We need wisdom, and God gives it generously.'

And then you notice, as he goes on, he says we not only need wisdom from a God who gives generously, but we need single-mindedness to trust in God unreservedly. "Let him ask in faith..." [verse 6] "...with no doubting. For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. That person must not suppose he will receive anything from the Lord, because he is a double-souled man, unstable in all his ways." I think perhaps the background in James' thinking here (and I myself think that this James is James, the brother of our Lord) is the very teaching that the Lord Jesus gave in the parable of the sower and the soils and the seed; when he speaks about the way the word of God is planted into the soil and begins to grow, but there is an instability in the soil. There are two things happening in the soil, and the cares about this world and the desire for other things chokes the life out of the planting of the word of God, and it comes to absolutely nothing. The man who is double-minded wants to hold onto Christ and hold onto himself. That man will make shipwreck of his soul. That's what James is saying. And so, here is one of the great paradoxes of life: that every taste of suffering and difficulty, darkness and perplexity the Christian goes through is a summons from the Lord Jesus Christ to say to us, let everything else go and hold onto Me.

And that is such a life-long reality: that the whole of the Christian life is going to be full of tests of various kinds, as we discover we believe we have given ourselves unreservedly to the Lord Jesus Christ, and more and more He exposes to us the pockets of resistance in our hearts to unquestioned allegiance to His generous and sovereign will and purposes. So we need not only wisdom from a God who gives generously, we need single-mindedness to trust God unreservedly.

But then, there's a third thing we need, and that is a focus on those things that will last eternally. And that's what he means in verses 9-11 when he says "...let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich man in his humiliation." When did you last see a rich man boasting in his humiliation? What's he speaking about? He's speaking about the way in which the gospel takes the poor man out of his poverty to discover the riches in Jesus Christ, and the same gospel takes the rich man out of his riches to find all of his riches exclusively in Jesus Christ.

You know, I think the last time I was here at this Men's Rally, there were a couple of pastors my own age, I think, from Czechoslovakia here. And you only needed to see the cut of their suits to know that they were poor men, but in their presence I scarcely felt worthy to tie their shoelaces, because they were rich in what lasts eternally. And our great problem in living the Christian life, dear brothers, is that so many of us are rich in this world, but impoverished in the riches that really last.

More and more, it seems to me that although we do it in a multitude of different ways, there is only one thing really worth living for, and that is what lasts eternally. And there is only one way really worth living, and that is to inject into everything I do, however mundane it may seem to be, a consecration to Jesus Christ that cries out from my heart, "O my God and Savior, enable me to do this in such a way that something will emerge from it that lasts for eternity."

And when you see your life in that context the thing that really makes you astonished is that you suffer so little; that you experience so little deprivation. The thing that perhaps ought to make us tremble is that God would leave us to our 'this-worldliness', and leave us to amassing things that will perish with ourselves, as James so straightly says: "The sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls and its beauty perishes." So also will the rich man simply fade away in the midst of his pursuits. Here is the rich man building his empire, and in the light of the solidity of eternity it all simply disappears like a withering flower that fades away in the midst of his enterprises.

You know, when we have come through times of difficulty—and most of us in this room will be able to pinpoint, may even have thoughts in our minds as these words are used, of the specific difficulties through which we have gone. Are you more stable and less worldly as a result? Or less stable and more worldly?

You see, the test that James is speaking about is not only the test that comes while we're being tested; the test is the response that we make, having been tested; whether we have allowed the heavenly Father to take hold of our clenched fists, tightly holding on to our own lives, and pry them open as He does, until all that we hold onto in our hands to stabilize us and give us security.... Are they, then, those things that will stabilize us and give us security for all eternity, until they lay bare in our hands and we see that in which we have been trusting? And we say to Him, 'Father, take it from me! I wish to depend upon it no more!' And it is as we thus grow that real Christian character is produced in our lives, and we grow to maturity.

I think in this connection of a girl I knew in Philadelphia, who attended the church I attended. Her name was Alison. She was born in 1971, and developed cancerous growths behind her eyes, and had a life of struggle that ended, humanly speaking, prematurely. She became a Christian when she was 17. The tumors grew; she had aggressive therapy; the tumors returned. One eye had been removed in her childhood. The other eye was then removed because she faced either total blindness or death. When no more treatment was possible, here's what she wrote: she said,

“I wouldn't part with everything that has come out in these last five years for anything. I wouldn't trade it. I could choose to be grumpy about the cancer, which I do many days, but I can't ignore all the blessings that have come through it.

“I don't want to mislead anyone and have myself raised as a model of Christian faith. I often struggle in my relationship with God, and gripped with fears of dying. I have wept before God, pleaded with Him, demanded healing from Him; cursed Him, and tried to bargain with Him. Yet even in my darkest moments when the words of Scripture fell dead on a numb and unbelieving heart, some deep calling within, some solid thing assured me that my Father would pull me back to faith.

“I've suffered through many bleak periods in which I've felt like a mere dishrag in the hands of God, to be discarded after use; or worse, the butt of some horrid cosmic joke. But God has all along hemmed me in on every side.

“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to You. The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You.”

“God has remained faithful. I did not understand what God was doing, and I don't claim fully to now; but I did know that what was happening was under His control. And what becomes ever clearer to me is that, far from punishing me, He has blessed me. And whenever God does call me home [which He did, shortly afterwards], I want people to understand that my life was not too short—not for the rich blessings in my life.”

What a thing to be able to write in your twenties, facing, reacting to the ultimate crisis.

It's men the gospel produces. And men are measured in the eyes of God and His grace not so much by their actions, but by what is expressed in their reactions. And that is why James points us ultimately to the great encouragements that we need to bathe our souls in this evening, especially those who are going through trials: Verse 12 — “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial; for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.”

“...Which God has promised to those who love Him”...this is a wonderful passage, my brothers; exhorting us to boast in our humiliation, because God generously gives us the wisdom we need to understand His purposes. And so we're encouraged to “count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds”, because of what we know...because of what we know.

I wonder if you do know these things. I wonder if you're applying them to the circumstances of your life. I wonder if your family, your children, see this kind of maturity and steadfastness. In many ways, it is just as important (and sometimes more important) than what you say to them.

I've never forgotten, as a student reading the words of that strange Danish

philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard, when he says in his journals that the worst thing in the world for a young man to have is not a free-thinker as a father—an atheist, or a communist, or a libertarian, or somebody to the far left, as a father. Some of us think that's the worst possible thing a young man could have as a father, and we bless ourselves we are not that kind of father to our children. But listen to what Kierkegaard says. **Kierkegaard says** the worst possible thing for a young man to have as a father is a man who professes strict Christian orthodoxy and whose very life breathes the fact that he is not really submitted to the heavenly Father; that he does not really in a whole-souled way, but only in a double-minded way, trust in Jesus Christ; who, when he faces difficulties and trials, collapses rather than stands.

And so, what is at stake in the teaching of James is not simply my life as I live this life within community of the church, or as I live this life within community of the world, and my witness to the world. It matters most particularly that I live my life where I am most naked— before my family, before my children—and they see whether the gospel has produced this kind of maturity.

Oh, it must have been really something to have James as your pastor, don't you think? But you see, they have probably seen it in him, and so they could take it from him. Take it from him, my brothers, who is, as I suspect, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ; and take it from Christ, who is your elder brother.

Our heavenly Father, how large your word is, and how searching at times to the depths of our souls; how rigorous and vigorous it is. But as we taste it and are even encouraged by it as You put us down, humbling us in order to lift us up, exalting us, we thank You for the passion You show us through Your word: that You want us entirely and without reservation absolutely for Yourself, and You want to make us real and true men of God, men like Jesus Christ. And we pray as we are blessed and strengthened together, and as we are encouraged in our worship together, and as we sit under Your word this evening together, that You would change us by Your truth and make us different men. And this we pray for Jesus Christ our Savior's sake. Amen.

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