

Faith & The Trials of Life James 1:2-12

If I were to ask you this morning, “How many of you want to be like Jesus?”

- You at least know how you should answer, “I do!”

But if I ask you, “How many of you would like some more trials?”

- You would be far less likely to raise your hand!

And yet, we see here that they go together; God uses trials to make us more like Jesus.

It’s like, “How many of you want to be buff, fit, have a six pack abs?”

- We’d raise our hands!

But if I asked, “How many of you want to spend a few hours in the gym and change your diet and lifestyle?”

- Crickets. “I like pizza, not pull ups.”

I’m not saying we should like trials, but we need to understand them rightly.

Overview of 1:2-12

We see the theme of **faith and trials** in this section, or **faith in a life filled with trials**.

- It’s obviously important to James – he begins his letter talking about trials.

2-4 – Enduring in trials, and the perspective we need: these trials are *maturing us*.

5-8 – Wisdom is needed for navigating trials, seeing the world correctly, and growing in maturity.

9-11 – A particular trial. James contrasts two socioeconomic positions.

12 – James highlights **eternal reward to the faithful who endure trials**.

James also emphasizes **faith**.

V. 3: “The testing of your faith”

V. 6: “Ask in faith”

9-11: Notice the **future tense** used. James is describing the reversal of fortunes that will happen in the next life.

12: Clearly the **future is in view** – trust in God’s promised reward for faithfulness.

It’s a relevant topic for everyone.

- All you need for this sermon to apply is one trial!
- How many of you have at least one trial?
- How many are sitting next to your trial?

The trials of life never end.

How many of you have thought, “if I could just get through this trial, then I’ll be free”?

- We will always have trials – **they just change from season to season!** (Examples)

I shall outline it in three parts: (1) The Believer's Perspective, (2) The Believer's Petition, and (3) The Believer's Promise.

#1: The Believer's Perspective (1:2-4)

James gets right to his point – after a one-verse greeting, we meet an imperative!

V. 2: Count it “all joy” when you face various trials?

James doesn't answer every question we may have about trials, but he says some very important things.

“When” James says do not to be surprised when trials come (2:2).

- Trials are normal.
- Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I've overcome the world.”
- “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22)

“Various Trials” – “many colored” – same word in Peter.

Specific Trials for James' Audience

- Persecution, poverty, financial problems. (1:9-11)
- Oppression, marginalization, ostracism (2, 5)
- Sickness (5)
- Relocation (1:1)
- Conflict in the church (4:1-2)

Your Trials

- Marriage Difficulties; Looking for employment/Struggling to pay the bills; Sickness; Parenting; Relocation; Loneliness; Change; etc.

“Count” is a financial term that means “to evaluate.” Make a mental judgment.

- You can't control many of your trials, but **you can control your response.**

Wrong Responses

1. **Bitterness** (eg: Naomi). Life is hard, but God is good (James 1:17)
2. **Envy**. “I want their life, their kids”
3. **Self-Pity** – “Woe is me” – which is a form of pride
4. **Functional Saviors**: Drugs, drink, sex, entertainment, hobbies, surgery...
5. **Identity Issues**: You are not your trial! Your trial can overshadow all the evidences of God's grace;
6. **Despair and total loss of joy**: That's why James' words are so meaningful, “count it all joy.” **They were apparently at the risk of losing joy all together.**

“All Joy.” This is what James says our response should be.

- Does this sound ridiculous to you?
- Perhaps the readers were thinking, “How nice, a letter from Pastor Wacko!” (Hughes)

- It's "all joy" or better, "**pure joy.**"
- James doesn't say that "joy" is the only response to trials; it's *not* exclusively joy, but that you can indeed find real joy in trials. (Moo)

It's a joy that is **spiritual** and **eschatological** -
a joy of assurance that we belong to God, and that glory is coming after the suffering.

It doesn't mean that you enjoy suffering.
James isn't encouraging sick **masochism**.

Hebrews 12:11

¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems *painful rather than pleasant*, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

You're **NOT** being taught to "celebrate" when your neighbor has cancer, or that you just got fired, or that your spouse is adulterous.

Back to the word, "count."

Make a deliberate choice to experience joy in the midst of the pain.

- We can do this because our ultimate joy is in Christ, not circumstances.
- We can do this because we know that God is sovereign and He loves us; the joy isn't in the trial itself, but in **knowing the fruit of the trial is good.**
- **This is verses 3-4, we know something!**

Paul experienced joy in the midst of sorrow.

2 Cor 6:12 – (Context of affliction) "sorrowful" – yes, but "always rejoicing."

- I feel like that's the Christian life; that's my life as a pastor. I experience both of those on an hourly level sometimes!
- There's a well of joy in the midst of suffering for those who trust in God.
- **This seems like a strange experience to some, but it's a hallmark of genuine faith.**

2 Cor 7:4

In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy (cf., Acts 5:40-41; 13:52)

Phil 3:10-11 – There is an intimacy with Christ that is only found in the midst of suffering. There's nearness; closeness; joy. We often learn the deepest and best lessons there.

- Spurgeon, "Those in the sea of affliction, I bring up rare pearls."
- Rutherford, "When I find myself in the cellar of affliction, I look for the King's choicest wines."
- MLK Jr. said this about his various arrests, about his home being bombed twice; about the various death threats he received: **"The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God."**

A Caution

Now, we should **be careful in using this verse in crisis counseling.**

- If someone is rushed to the hospital bed, it may not be wisest to throw James 1:2 on them! “Oh, you just broke your leg, consider it all joy!”
- **The Christian life doesn't come with pom poms!**
- **There's a time to grieve, a time to weep, a time to pray, a time to simply sit with people, and there's a time to teach.**
- **Saying the right thing at the wrong time or in the wrong way may hurt a person not help them.**
- **Jesus wept** at Lazarus' tomb... He didn't tell them “to knock it off and count it joy.”

James isn't teaching this in the context of **crisis counseling**; instead his focus is on being faithful **in the crucible of life itself.**

- **It's a word not just for a particular moment, but for a lifetime.**
- He wants us **to see the world in a particular way.**
- Trials are opportunities for endurance, they prove faithfulness, and they lead to wisdom and maturity, therefore, consider it joy.
- We must remember that our Savior endured trials, all the way to the cross!
 - Hebrews 12:1-2 – “for the joy set before Him...”

3-4: Trials give an opportunity for you to endure faithfully and become more mature.

Notice the linking word in **verse 3**, “for” or “because”

3a: “knowing.”

- **Again, notice the emphasis on knowing something.**
- *Have a different perspective than others.*

Everyone will try to teach you something in your trial!

Be careful that you don't adopt the wrong perspective.

1. **Trite Counsel** – “Just be positive.” “Don't worry, be happy!” “When life hands you a lemon, make lemonade.”
 - **It's all devoid of God, his sovereignty, and conformity to Jesus.**
2. **Home Remedies** – wheat grass, yoga, Kale, aroma therapy, acupuncture, more essential oils! Many of these may help, but we need deeper care.
3. **Prosperity Gospel** – “You don't have enough faith that's why you're suffering”
4. **Shoddy Theology:** “Jesus will fix everything if you get saved.” “God is mad at you.” “God is not good.”

Here's what you know, Christian....

3b: We know that trials produce “**produces steadfastness**”

- **Steadfastness/Perseverance** – “**the etymology points to the idea of “remaining under”**” – the picture of carrying a heavy load. (Moo)
- That's a good word. Being faithful under a heavy load for a long time.

- It develops spiritual muscles, character, maturity.
- **Cross-country runners learn to increase their distance in training little by little; and in due time, they are made stronger, more able to run the distance.**
- In a same way, enduring adversity with faithfulness makes us stronger, more mature, more able to press on as trials come along.

Endurance is not a passive thing – it is learned in the school of trials.

And notice, **it's not trials in and of themselves** that leads to maturity; **it's enduring trials faithfully that leads to maturity.**

So “let it have its full effect”

- “let” means to *submit*.
- It's having an effect... it's like refining gold (Job, Prov. 17:3; 1 Pet. 1:7).
- It is through the trials that our faith is tested, and if we endure, we grow in maturity.

4: The Ultimate goal: “perfect and complete, not lacking anything”

So see the big picture!

- These trials are giving us an opportunity to demonstrate our faithfulness, and as we endure faithfully, God grows us in maturity.

James 1 is not an isolated text!

Romans 5:3-4

³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

1 Peter 1

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The **joy in verse 2** is only possible when you have this perspective: **a spiritual perspective, a heavenly perspective, a divine perspective.**

#2: The Believer's Petition (1:5-8)

“If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God”

- Wisdom involves the ability to live of a godly life, as in **James 3:17-18**, and to endure testing.

God may not remove the trial, but he can give you wisdom to learn how to navigate through the trial, and to remain faithful in the trial.

A. Why We Can Ask (5b)

God is a generous giver

- Literally, “let Him ask the giving God”
- It is in His very nature to be a giver.
- In other religions, God is a taker. In Christianity, God is a giver.
- He even gave up his only Son on our behalf.
- James 1:17 — he never changes!
 - Many things change in this life - many things become outdated — like the ancient practice of renting movies from **Blockbuster**. How many of you remember renting movies? For you college students, we used to have to go to a store, and get a VHS — after riding to the store on a dinosaur, and put it in a VCR!
 - Technology changes; what’s cool changes, but not God — always and only good. What James has written 2,000 years ago is still true!

He gives “**generously**”

- The word can be **simplicity**.
- The simple gift is the pure gift.
- God gives without hesitation, and without expect a favor in return.
- He gives without strings attached.
- He delights in giving without calculating the return.

“Ask and it will be given to you” (Matt. 7:7a).

- In Luke 11: Human fathers give good things to their children; how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.
- James carries this idea of God’s great generosity.

God gives “to all” those who genuinely ask.

- That includes you!
- God is generous to all his children, not the “special elite Christians.”

God gives gives to all “without reproach”

- That is, God gives without rebuke.
- He doesn’t scold us, “I already gave you something this year”
- His welcome never ends.
- When you have had a spiritually bad day, because of his grace, you too are invited to his presence to ask him for wisdom.

B. How We Ask (6-8)

6a: We must ask in faith, without doubting (again echoing Jesus, cf, Mat 21:21-22)

- This means: **don't doubt God's character!**
- Believe that He hears you and that He keeps His promises!
- You must trust in His character to become a praying person.

“Doubt” doesn't mean that you don't occasionally have some level of uncertainty at times; in Greek it means to **“divide, to separate, or distinguish”** (McCartney).

- James is thinking of **a strong kind of doubting the character of God.**
- **Don't have a divided loyalty. Don't be hesitant because you question the character of God.**
- He's totally trustworthy!
- Don't hold back in your commitment to God and your pursuit of wisdom through prayer.

6b: We must not be like a “wave of the sea” – shifting, **unstable.**

- Don't be driven by godly **motives** one day, and worldly motives the next.
- Don't want God's **wisdom**, one day, and then the world's the next day.
- Don't pray and then say, **“This will never work.”**
- Seek God for wisdom **everyday** – believing he is the giving God.

7-8: The double-minded person is **trying to serve two masters**, and he or she shouldn't expect to receive anything.

- Double-mindedness is a lack of faith.
- **Don't be half-hearted in your pursuit of God and his wisdom; but be all in!**
- James' words are strong here because faith is so important to him.
- Your life will be chaotic, without direction and compass, if you aren't pursuing God's wisdom in faith.

#3: The Believer's Promise (1:9-12)

Verses 9-10 look back to the previous verses, and ahead to verse 12...

- They look back as it speaks of the idea of “testing” – James highlights a particular test: wealth.
- They look forward because it looks to the future eschatological blessing of the faithful, as James will hit in verse 12.

A. A Heavenly Perspective to Take Regarding Wealth (9-11)

brother - a Christian.

humble - “lowly,” “poor,” or “humble circumstances” (NIV)

- The word occurs **Mary's song**, as she sings of the reversal of fortunes in the end: “he has brought down the mighty from their throne and exalted those of humble estate (Luke 1:52)

Jesus came preaching “**good news to the poor.**” It was good news for them because of the **eschatological reversal**: the humble believers would be exalted.

James’ Audience: The majority of them were poor. Many forced to **relocate** to places like **Syria** and **northern Palestine**. They are facing hard economic times, and may have been socially marginalized.

James’ Point: **Look beyond your “worldly” state and boast in your in their high spiritual position; rejoice in, delight in your position before God as a Christian.**

- Your identity is not in your possessions, or your social position, but who you are in Christ.
- If you are in Christ, you are spiritually rich!
- **Don’t just look at what this world says about you; evaluate yourself spiritually!**
- **James 2:5** – similar, “God has chosen many of the poor to be rich in faith”

“Exaltation” – We belong to a **heavenly realm** as Christians.

- And we wait the day in which we are transformed into that full heavenly realm, as Paul describes in Phil 3:20-21.

10a The Rich. A Contrast.

There is disagreement about whether or not this “rich” person is a **Christian**.

- **I agree with Moo** and others that it seems best to think in that direction.
- The structure of 9-10 leads us to think that way.
- Moo: “For “rich” in v. 10 is most naturally taken as a modifier of “brother” in v. 9, parallel to “humble”: **“Let the brother who is lowly ... but let [the brother] who is rich....”**

If James is referring to a **non-Christian**, then he’s using irony to describe the coming judgment, **“Go ahead and boast, for all you really have to boast in is your coming humiliation before the judge.”**

- This idea is present throughout the Scriptures, like Luke 14:11.

On the whole, I think the most natural way to take it, as referring to a Christian, who is being told to do what the poor person is told to do: evaluate your life on the basis of your position before God, not in your position before the world.

- Remember, rich person, that you too are a sinner saved by the grace of God, and that the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

glory in your humiliation.

What does this mean?

- Quite simply: **Don’t boast not in you possessions or social position, but in your identification with Christ and his people, who are a matter of humiliation before the world (Moo).**
- **Don’t get too attached to it; don’t place confidence in it; don’t find your identity in it; don’t get puffed up because of it.**

Jeremiah 9:23-24

²³ Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

10b-11. The transitory nature of wealth.

Here’s why you shouldn’t base your life and identity on wealth: **Wealth, like a wild flower, he will “pass away.”**

- **Isaiah 40:6b-8**
- **Ps 103:15-16**

“Pass away” – refers to transitoriness.

11: Just like the scorching heat causes the plant to wither and be destroyed, so will the rich man/woman will fade away (die) in his/her business pursuits.

Don’t take pride in money, or your social status, for you are soon to fade away.

Both Riches and Poverty May Present Trials

- The poor may be tempted to steal, be envious, grow bitter, and more.
- The rich may become materialistic, and live without reference to God, and they can look down on the poor, or oppress them. They can be tempted to think they are in control of everything.

Proverbs 30 instructs both to rely on God, and keep the right perspective:

- ⁷ Two things I ask of you;
deny them not to me before I die:
- ⁸ Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me,
- ⁹ lest I be full and deny you
and say, “Who is the LORD?”
or lest I be poor and steal
and profane the name of my God.

Let us honor God by finding our identity and significance in our position in Christ, not in our position in the world.

B. A Heavenly Reward to Pursue (12)

James is back to the big idea: **trials**.

Here, he encourages us to **take the long view**.

You can hear an echo of **Matthew 5:11-12**:

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“**blessing**” – James adds to his teaching about trials, this word of **blessing now** (as we find joy in Christ, as we grow in maturity), and it’s a **blessing that looks forward to a permanent blessing in the future.**

If we endure faithfully, we will receive the “**crown of life.**”

- **The Greco-Roman the audience would have thought of that laurel wreath given to the victors in athletic games.**
- Paul uses the word in this way in **1 Cor. 9:25.**
- James probably also has the imagery in view – **it’s a fitting image.**
- **God bestows a crown on those who are faithful to the end.**
- Moo: “**If James, then, uses the *crown* to refer to the idea of reward, then the word *life* following *crown* will indicate what the reward is**” – that is, he will bestow life on us.
- **Revelation 2:10**: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

God has *promised* the reward of life **to those who love him.**

- Believe this! God keeps his promise!
- You will be rewarded for your faithfulness.
- **And the faithful are those “who love him.”**
- **1 Peter 1:8**

And that’s really the question. Do you love Him?

Love endures all things.

We endure trials faithfully because we love our Savior – the one who bore our greatest trial.

Hebrews says for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of God.

We look to Jesus for grace, and we endure in hope, knowing that He — right now — is interceding for us.

And one day we will see him! Then, it will be worth it.

The Crimson Tide one another title; and I bet if you asked those guys holding the trophy, if the workouts were worth it, they would all say “yes.”

Something infinitely greater awaits the faithful saint: the crown of life – life itself with our King.

On that day, we won't regret having been faithfully in the midst of trials!

So let's be faithful, and let's encourage one another to this end as well, just as James is encouraging the saints here.