

Trials are a Cause for Joy (James 1:1-12)

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If you have a Bible with you, please open it to the book of James. Last Sunday, we finished a series of sermons in the Psalms entitled, “Fear Not!” When the coronavirus came crashing into our world 8 weeks ago, altering daily life for our church family and our community, it was easy to be afraid. There were a lot of unknowns. It was good to remember that even when there are reasons to fear, there are always better reasons to trust the Lord.

But the longer mandatory social distancing for our church continues, and the more life with the coronavirus becomes a new normal, the more my greatest concern as a pastor isn’t as much whether we will fight our temptations to fear with the truth of God’s Word. My greatest concern as a pastor at this point is whether our physical separation and particularly our inability to gather for corporate worship will occasion a slide into spiritual apathy.

The spiritual strength we derive from the weekly gathering of the saints is priceless. Hebrews 10:23-25, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” Our faithful God keeps us faithful to himself through the example and encouragement of his people.

When we’re distant from God’s people, it’s easy to feel distant from God. We start coasting spiritually, assuming our relationship with God instead of doing the hard work necessary to help it grow. We might not consciously decide to walk away from Jesus. We just don’t think about him as much. We stop pressing in to know and enjoy him. Reading his Word and prayer become less and less frequent.

Maybe you know in your head that being a Christian should impact the way you live even while you’re confined at home, but God doesn’t feel relevant to the “new normal” of your daily routine. The holding pattern we’re in socially and economically has crept into your soul. Your faith feels cold. Old temptations to sin are resurfacing. You have all this discretionary time, but it’s not helping you grow spiritually. To the contrary, you feel increasingly aimless and adrift.

The danger of spiritual apathy in a time like this warrants careful attention to the book of James. James is a hard-hitting book. It’s an in-your-face kind of book. He wrote it to shake his readers out of an anemic “faith” that leaves Jesus on the shelf of religious knowledge where he has little to no impact on the way we live.

James isn’t void of theology, or truth about God, by any stretch. Yet his main focus is squarely on how we should live in light of who God is. It’s an eminently practical book, an application-oriented book. From the very beginning of chapter 1, James wades through a pile of real-life issues like suffering, decision-making, money, speech, relationships, temptation to sin, and prayer, showing us what it means to follow Jesus.



In many ways, he writes the same way Jesus taught – sharp, clear, and to the point. He doesn't spend time qualifying himself to soften the force of truth or avoid offending us. It's hard to read James and not be convicted. And I think it's exactly what our souls need to keep us running hard after Jesus right now.

I say that recognizing some of you may be on the fence about Christianity. You have some hesitations. Maybe you've been around professing Christian who said they believed this or that but lived just like everyone else. You wonder if all this God stuff really makes a difference or if Christianity is just another road to hypocrisy. James will be good for you too, friend. It proves real Christianity isn't idle. It's a faith that works.

Hear the Word of God from James 1:1-12:

"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 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."

My extended family has always enjoyed playing word games. One of my favorites is Taboo, a word association game where you try to get your team to say the key word on your card without using any of the related words on your card.

For example, if the key word is "pandemic," the "taboo" words I'm not allowed to use in my description might be virus, quarantine, sickness, global, and influenza. Of course, those are the words we typically associate with the word "pandemic," which is what makes the game challenging. So I might have to get creative and say, "A situation that makes people buy massive quantities of toilet paper," assuming my teammates share our recent COVID-19 experience.

Try a little word association experiment with me this morning. If the word is “trials,” what related words come to mind? What would you expect to find on the Taboo card? I would expect words like difficult, hard, painful, challenge, and test. Jesus’ brother, James, the probable author of the biblical book by the same name, answers that question in rather shocking fashion. He associates two words with “trials” that are definitely not on my instinctive list – joy and blessing.

James 1:1-12 functions as an introduction of sorts for various themes he will circle back to later in the letter. But they have a unifying center, and the main point is found in the bookends, verses 2 and 12. James tells us that faith works, it makes a difference in our lives, by giving us a cause for joy in the midst of every sort of trial. No matter the precipitating factors, no matter why a hard situation comes your way, when it does, Christian, you have reason to rejoice. It’s shocking. It’s stunning. And it is one of the most distinctive marks of genuine Christianity. So why should we rejoice in trials?

1) TRIALS STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH (verses 2-4)

Look at verse 2. “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, (verse 3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” There are different kinds of tests. Some tests merely reveal the presence or absence of something. The swab for COVID-19 is like that. It reveals whether you have the virus. In a similar way, a multiple-choice SOL in history reveals whether you paid attention in class.

But there’s another kind of test that does more than reveal something. It creates something. It builds something. A speed workout at the track is this sort of test. So is the constant tension in high-rep weightlifting. Your fitness level grows as a result of taking tests like that. Heating up silver or gold to extremely high temperatures is similar. It doesn’t just “reveal” whether you have a precious metal or painted plastic. It actually purifies and strengthens the metal, removing chemical elements that would otherwise compromise its worth and value.

The “test” of faith James speaks of in verse 3 is the second type. Whenever you encounter a trial, an unpleasant situation (whether relational, financial, spiritual, or physical), you have a choice. You can persevere in trusting and obeying God, even when it’s hard, or you can deal with the trial in whatever way seems best to you.

When we respond God’s way, something is produced. James calls it “steadfastness,” which is another word for endurance or spiritual strength. And when our spiritual strength grows through trials, what happens? Look at verse 4. We become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” We grow in holiness. We become more like Jesus.

For example. If your spouse or sibling attacks or tears you down with their words and you fire back with a barrage of your own or relationally disengage and give them the silent treatment,



what happens? Everything gets worse. They get angrier. You become more bitter. You lose ground spiritually.

But what if you repay their evil with good? Regardless of their response, you grow spiritually. Your choice to forebear doesn't just change what happens in that moment. It actually makes you a more patient person. It strengthens your ability to overcome evil with good in the future. The spiritual muscle of patience you persevered in exercising starts to grow. You become a bit more like God himself, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But let's be honest. In the middle of a trial, we often don't care about becoming more like Jesus. We just want the trial to go away as fast as possible. So we say and do whatever it takes to make it stop. And if we can't stop it, we try to avoid or escape the situation. If the bills are piling up, we ignore them. If our spouse is unreasonable, we leave them. If a classmate says something offensive on Facebook, we unfriend them.

Why are we so unwilling (verse 4) to "let steadfastness have its full effect"? Because we don't want to become more like Jesus. We just want comfort, convenience, and security. Here's the reality, Friend. You will never rejoice in the midst of trial unless conformity to Christ is a desirable thing in your eyes. And conformity to Christ, becoming holy as he is holy, will never be a desirable thing in your eyes, worth the pain and anguish of endurance, unless Christ himself is desirable to you.

Does that mean the whole process of growing spiritually, having our faith strengthened through trials, is held hostage by our lack of love for Jesus? Praise God, no! Love for Jesus is one of the very things trials "perfect" and "complete" in us if we are willing to persevere in trusting and obeying God in the midst of them.

For when we do, we discover, even in great sorrow, that God keeps his promises! He cares for us. He sustains us. He makes us more like himself. And as we experience his faithfulness, we grow in our love and gratitude for him, which strengthens our ability to persevere in the first place.

So refuse to make your greatest goal in life avoiding hardship. Make becoming more like Jesus and the intimacy you will experience with him as a result your highest ambition. Remember the secret to joy isn't the satisfaction of all our desires but rather the sanctification of our desires that they may be truly and eternally satisfied in Jesus.

When knowing him is your greatest good, even the darkest of trials becomes the servant of your joy. It won't happen automatically. If you bury your head in the sand, so to speak, and passively wait out the storm, your faith won't be strengthened. But if you choose to persevere, if you fight to trust and obey Jesus every step along the way, you will grow, my friend. The Lord promises as much, and generations of faithful saints testify to the same. Rightly embraced, trials are a cause for joy because they strengthen our faith.

2) TRIALS TEACH US TO PRAY WITH FAITH (verses 5-8)

It's the "rightly embraced" part of our response to trials that's difficult, isn't it? We're not born knowing how to trust and obey the Lord when life is hard. We're not born possessing wisdom. We have to learn the art of godly living. So what do we do in the midst of a trial when we don't know what to do? When life smacks you in the face and the shelves of the wisdom pantry are empty.

Look at verse 5. "If any of you lacks wisdom," if any of you struggle to know how to trust and obey the Lord in the midst of trial, "let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." What do we tend to do when deciding how we're going to respond to a particular trial? We follow our own thoughts and desires as if we are the fount of wisdom. Or we go with the flow and do whatever other people say we should do as if they are the fount of wisdom.

We look in or out when we what we need the most is to look up! Daniel 2:20–21, "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding..." What sort of understanding must we have in order to receive wisdom from God? We must understand that he alone is the fount of wisdom and ask him for it, instead of trying to dig it out of ourselves or the world around us.

There is a beautiful simplicity to verse 5. If you lack wisdom, ask God. Period. It's not complicated. It's not convoluted. It might be hard. He might not tell you everything you want to know. But whenever we ask, whenever we pray, "Lord, give me wisdom. Show me how to trust and obey you in the midst of this trial," what will he do, through his Word, his Spirit, and godly counsel?

He will "give generously." He's not an insurance agent who's always looking for a way to say "no" and deny the claim. He's eager to say yes. He's not selfish. He's lavish. Ask for wisdom – praying humbly and sincerely, for the sake of God's priorities and purposes – and "it will be given" to you.

Those qualifications are really important. Why? Because of what James says in verse 6. "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 he will receive anything from the Lord..."

God is eager to answer our prayers for wisdom, especially in trials. But there is a kind of prayer he will not answer – a "prayer" that lacks integrity, the request of a heart that is divided, a spiritual fence-sitter that is toying with following Jesus while trying to keep one foot firmly planted in the kingdom of this world. It's the "double-minded" man (verse 8), who's trying to integrate the perks of Christianity with the pleasures of sin.



As Christians, we can hear the word “doubt” and immediately get worried. Oh no. I genuinely trust God, but sometimes I struggle. My faith is weak. I feel like the man in Mark 9 who said to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” That’s not the kind of “doubt” James is talking about here. The kind of doubt James decries in verse 7 is the attitude that presumes we can cash in on God’s help absent wholehearted commitment to Christ.

Douglas Moo, “James is not...claiming that prayers will never be answered where any degree of doubt exists – for some degree of doubt on at least some occasions is probably inevitable in our present state of weakness. Rather, he wants us to understand that God responds to us only when our lives reflect a basic consistency of purpose and intent: a spiritual integrity...Prey to the shifting winds of motive and desire, [the doubter] wants wisdom from God one day and the wisdom of the world the next.”

You can’t serve two masters, friend. There’s no middle ground when it comes to following Jesus and experiencing the blessing of his wisdom in the storms of life. Sit on the fence, dabble in religion only when it suits your fancy or life feels especially hard, and you will remain “unstable” in all your ways. The fluctuating and contradictory desires within you plus the changing circumstances all around you will keep knocking you about like a swell of water in the sea. Go all in with Jesus and you will discover “stability” in all your ways.

Trials give us an opportunity to pray with faith, to cry out to God for wisdom because we have set our hope for salvation fully on him. If you pray like that, friend, God’s response may be to lead you through another trial! Remember, how does God forge in us the spiritual strengths we lack, wisdom included? He ordains trials of various kinds, answering our prayer for wisdom by testing our faith, for it’s through the sanctifying force of trials that we grow in the art of godly living. Trials are a cause for joy because they teach us to pray with faith.

3) TRIALS REVEAL THE TRUE REWARD OF FAITH (verses 9-12)

James’ admonition in verses 9-12 is the opening salvo of a point he will come back to again and again. The true reward of faith isn’t found in the stuff of this world. “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.”

The global economic damage from the coronavirus is a wake-up call for all who have ears to ear. The riches of this world are not eternal. A single virus, a single pandemic, can bring our wealth crashing to the ground. It could evaporate tomorrow, and even if it remains until you die, you can’t take it with you. It doesn’t matter how much money you have. You will eventually fade away.

Trials have a wonderful way of reminding us of our mortality. They make us feel weak. They make us feel vulnerable. That’s good, friends, because we are. Every one of us is like this blade of grass, my friend – here today and gone tomorrow.



How then should we live as Christians? If you're poor in this world, focus on and glory in the fact that you are infinitely rich in Christ. Your worth and value as his blood-bought son or daughter couldn't be greater. You are already seated with him in the heavenly places, Christian. You are his co-heir. All things are his. Therefore, one day, all things will be yours. Don't find your identity in your money. Find your identity in him.

And if you are rich in this world, take care to keep your eyes on the fleeting nature of your wealth. It's not going to last. It doesn't make you any better or more valuable in the sight of God. Keep the day of your death in view and invest your money now through generous giving that stores up treasure in heaven.

The test of material prosperity and poverty are among the most significant trials we encounter in this life, brother and sisters. Both present a test of faith, tempting us to either lust for or attach our hearts to the vanity of wealth and riches. It's a fatal mistake, because true blessing, the real reward of faith in Christ, isn't found in this life. It's the joy and blessing of eternal life with Jesus in heaven. It's the "crown of life" in verse 12 "which God has promised to those who love him."

What do we tend to do in trials? We say, "Ok, God, I'll do it your way for a while, but only if you come through for me quickly and I make more money or live longer or have fewer troubles in this world than the next person." That's not faith, friends. That's not wholehearted trust and obedience. That's manipulation, and God will have none of it.

The blessing of remaining steadfast under trial isn't delivered by Amazon. It's given by King Jesus, when he welcomes you into his eternal dwelling place. The "test" may remain until the day the Savior calls you home. The "test" may strip away everything you value in this world. But the great reversal is coming. The day of glory will dawn. No one who hopes in him will be put to shame. Every tear, every difficult hour, every sleepless night, every loss you suffer in this world on the path of following him will be rewarded with eternal joy.

Endure the test, brothers and sisters. Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Don't stop running hard after Jesus. Our trials become a cause for joy when we strip away our false hopes and refocus our attention on the true reward of our faith.

CONCLUSION

Trials strengthen our faith. Trials teach us to pray with faith. And trials reveal the true reward of our faith. For those reasons, I say to you with James, consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds.

The presence of joy never entails the absence of sorrow. It simply means that there is something distinct, something different about how we respond as Christians to the trials of this



life that causes the world to stop and listen, when no matter what happens, no matter how bad things get, you continue to rejoice in the Lord.

It's not what super Christians do. It's the privilege and distinctive mark of every son and daughter of the King. May it be said of you, friend. Whenever you encounter a trial, you have good reason to rejoice because what they are working and accomplishing in you, by the grace of God, could not be more valuable.