

Sermon outline and notes:

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## James 1:1-4, 12      “How Joy is Possible in Trials”

Intro. This morning I begin a series of messages through the epistle of James. I want to start off by giving a brief introduction to the book. Of course v.1 indicates that James wrote this letter. Though he was the half-brother of Jesus Christ, he does not identify himself in that way with human pride. Rather, in all humility, he identifies himself as “a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He doesn’t say, “I’m the brother of Jesus,” but “I’m the slave of Jesus.” That is remarkable, for it is normal to have sibling rivalry among brothers. You can imagine how James & his brothers felt about Jesus growing up. Jesus was the first-born, & He was *so* perfect, especially in the eyes of his mother! I guess we shouldn’t be surprised that during the ministry of Jesus, James and his brothers did not believe in Jesus. They were jealous of Him. Only after Jesus graciously appeared to James after the resurrection did he believe in Jesus. Then, some years later, James became the senior pastor of the Jerusalem church. He was especially concerned about Jewish Christians, and he addresses them in this letter.

Unlike Paul’s letters, this letter is not very theological, but instead focuses on the practical aspects of Christian living. And so from the very beginning of his letter he addresses practical issues. I hope you will benefit from this practical series, and encourage others to attend this series of messages.

Notice what subject James covers first. He talks about trials. Why is that the first topic? The reason is that everyone in the world encounters them. The early Jewish Christians certainly had their share of trials. Many faced persecution as Christians. Right here in v.1 he describes them as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” They had been uprooted from their homeland.

Now evidently some of these Christians were not responding very well to these trials. Trials naturally lead to sorrow and distress. Yet James says that it is possible to experience joy in the midst of trials. How is that possible? First of all, we need to:

### I. UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF TRIALS

He says in v.2, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” It’s unfortunate that the King James Version has translated the word “trials” as “temptation.” The verb form means “to put someone to the test”, regardless of whether the results of the testing are positive or negative. James here is not referring to temptation. If that were the case, he wouldn’t have said in v.12 happy is the man who endures it, but happy is the man who resists it. So having established that James has in mind trials instead of temptations, let’s see what he says about the nature of trials. First, we need to understand:

A. Their Certainty - James does not say, “*If* you fall into various trials.” Instead, he said “when (*hotan*) you fall into various trials.” James implies the inevitability of trials. Trials and temptations are not something you can escape. From the time you are born, to the time you die, you walk in a world whose highways are littered with the potholes of troubles, trials, tragedies, and tribulations. If you want to know where you are headed today, you are headed for trouble. The

Bible says in Job 5:7, “Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.” Just as surely as weeds grow in gardens, and thorns grow on roses, you are going to have trouble.

Yet there is a heresy being perpetrated through some preaching today that says, “If you become a good Christian with enough faith, you will not face troubles and hardships.” The truth of the matter is, the better the Christian you are, the more severe the trials you *may* have to encounter. Some of the godliest and greatest people in the Bible faced the worst trouble. Job was a blameless upright man who feared God and turned away from evil. Yet, in one day Job lost everything from family, to finances, to fortune, to fitness, to friends. Daniel was a man totally committed to God, who prayed three times a day to the Lord. All he got for his praying was a free trip to the lion’s den. Joseph was a man of unquestioned integrity, decency, loyalty, and purity, who was sold by his own brothers as a slave, and later thrown into prison for a crime he didn’t commit, without even a trial. Jesus Himself experienced great trouble. And after Him, the greatest Christian in the New Testament was the Apostle Paul. And yet, he suffered more tribulation and hardships than most of us will ever experience. Peter said in 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trail which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.” The fact is troubles and trials are simply unavoidable.

I hope you have come to realize that even though the Christian life can be full, satisfying and truly blessed, we are not exempt from trouble. Why is that? It is because we are still sinful beings who live in a fallen world. Christians get cancer. Christians have heart attacks. Christians lose loved ones. Christians are killed by drunk drivers. Christians die in wars. There is going to be trouble because of the sin principle that is active in the world. We live in a sin-cursed world. And until Jesus comes again and lifts the curse, it is reasonable to expect trouble in our lives even as Christians. Trouble is a way of life, so don’t think you’re alone if you’re experiencing it.

Just last night I was saddened by some news that came in my email. Back in Bible College I had a young professor from the Philippines. We became friends over time. He was a good man, & a good professor. Yet his teenager son was diagnosed with cancer & died before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. A few years later he went back to the Philippines to pastor a large church in Manila. While on a preaching trip this past week he suffered a massive heart attack & died. He was no more than 60 years old. His dear wife lost a son, and now her husband, even when he was serving God.

So if we expect that trials will come, even to Christians, we will not be so sad & distressed. We just know they are part of life. We cannot avoid them completely.

Now even though James talks about the certainty of trials, he also mentions:

B. Their Unexpectedness – We know trials will come; we just don’t know when. So James “when you fall into various trials.” “Fall” (*peripepto*) means “to fall into the midst of, & be surrounded by.”

The Greek word is used in Luke 10:30 of the man the Good Samaritan found who “fell among thieves.” As he traveled the Jericho road, he did not expect to be ambushed. Quite unexpectedly, he was surrounded by thieves.

Even so, troubles often come into our lives like that. We rarely see them coming. Troubles hide behind bushes of busyness. They conceal themselves in the shadows of success. Everything may be going great and then suddenly, wham! The trials of life hit you again. You can’t predict these things. You never know when the next trial is going to come.

We also see from the meaning of the Greek word that troubles tend to surround you, and come at you from every side. You may face several troubles at the same time, and at times, you can feel a bit overwhelmed.

C. They Come in Many Forms - Notice that James is speaking of the fact that we fall into “various” trials. The word (*poikilos*) literally means “of various colors or sorts.” Trials come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Sometimes it comes in the burning red of affliction or excessive debt; other times in the deep blue of depression. Trials may be black, as the death of a loved one. There are physical trials, financial trials, psychological trials, social trials, and spiritual trials, such as persecution, or temptation. We may indeed face all kinds of trials in life.

How do you feel right now? If all you had was the last half of v.2, you would not want to get out of bed! You would want to crawl into your shell & not come out. Yet trials & troubles are a part of life. So what are we to do? James tells us in v.2. Now my next main point is this:

## II. HAVE THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE TOWARD TRIALS

Now you are often not responsible for the trials that will surely come into your life. But you *are* responsible for how you respond to your trials. You need to respond with the right perspective. Notice what James says in v.2, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” He does not say “consider it some joy.” He says, “count it all (*pasa*) joy.” We are to have a joy that is complete and full even when we go through trials.

Now that is just the opposite of the way we normally feel & think. When the car breaks down, or you lose your job, or you get sick, your natural reaction is *not* to have joy. We typically get angry, upset, and mad. It is natural for us to get down and depressed about our trials and difficulties. We usually rejoice when the trial is *over*, but not when we are experiencing the trial.

Furthermore, it is a normal response to run and shrink away from trials & troubles. It is natural and human for us to pray and ask God to remove the trial from us, whether it is sickness, a financial hardship, or whatever. Or quite a few people try to find a temporary escape from trials by means of alcohol or drugs.

Instead of such natural responses, James says in v.2 that we should experience joy in the midst of our trials. We have a responsibility not to respond with sadness or anger or a bad mood, but with joy. How is that even possible? In order to have joy & victory over trials, we must learn to cultivate a right perspective toward our trials. Again, James says, “count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” Notice his use of the words “count” in v.2 and “knowing” in v.3. The word count (*hegeomai*) means “to consider, deem, account, think.” You see, the key is not to focus on the trouble, but to focus on the Lord, and think about what God is doing on our behalf through our trials. The Christian can rejoice in trials when he knows Romans 8:28, which says, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

Heb. 12:22 says that our Lord was able to endure the Cross because of “the joy that was set before Him.” Thinking about the cross in Gethsemane brought Him grief & sorrow, but when He focused on all the good that the cross would accomplish, and when He focused on the reward that would follow, He was able to rejoice as He faced the greatest trial of His life.

So in order to have joy in trials, you need to have the right perspective. Think about the fact that God is working to accomplish some good in your life, and rejoice. That is why Paul could say in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice.”

Now in vv.3-4 James tells us what we need to think about or consider as we are going through trials. So notice the next step in having joy in trials:

### III. RECOGNIZE THE IMMEDIATE PRODUCTS OF TRIALS

James says in v.3, “knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” Think about two immediate results that come into your life due to trials, & you can have joy. First of all:

A. Our Faith Is Tested – Here James talks about “the testing of your faith.” Our trials bring about a process of “testing.” That word (*dokimadzo*) literally refers to testing metal. Let’s think of that process and make spiritual applications. Now one way to test metal is this:

1. Heat Is Applied - Our trials are like the fire and heat upon the metal. Someone has said, “A Christian is like a tea bag, he’s not worth much until he’s been through some hot water.” Yes, God has a definite purpose in allowing times of difficulty.

After the heat has been applied:

2. Impurities Are Removed – When a metal like gold is heated to the point of melting, the gold is heavier than the impurities, & the impurities tend to rise to the top and are exposed. Then the impurities can be removed.

Likewise, when a Christian goes through a difficult trial, their impurities tend to come to the surface. We all can “act” like good people, but when trials come our way, the sin that we are disguising will come out. We may explode with anger and bitter words, or we may do something else that is sinful. Trials show us our spiritual weaknesses. But at such times we can turn to the Lord for forgiveness & deal with our spiritual weaknesses.

Furthermore, in trials you are much more sensitive to the presence of God. Your communion with Him increases as you search the Scriptures to find answers to your problems. You pray more often & more earnestly, & ask others to pray for you. You can experience God’s sustaining grace. All of this draws you closer to the Lord, the very source of your joy.

3. Genuineness Is Proven - “Testing” (*dokimion*) also means “proof.” Troubles and hardships afford an opportunity for proving the genuineness of your faith. Everyone needs to have their faith tested. How do you know you are truly a Christian? How do you know that your faith is real? When you come out of a trial and still have your faith, it confirms that you’re really a believer. The same truth is taught in v.12, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation [or “a trial”]; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life....”

Jewelers know that a genuine diamond placed in water sparkles brilliantly, whereas the sparkle of the imitation is practically extinguished. By way of analogy I find that the faith of many people under the water of sorrow or affliction is nothing but an imitation. However, when a true child of God is immersed in a trial, he will shine as brilliantly as ever.

How one handles trouble is an indication of the reality of one’s faith or the lack of it. You may think because you come to church every Sunday, sing praises, give money, take notes, and walk piously, that your faith is strong. But there is no better test of your faith than troubles. You see, some people come to church, profess Christ and even get baptized. Yet when trouble comes into their lives, they’re gone. They blame God and walk away, convinced that Christianity doesn’t work.

I heard about a man who had dropped out of church. One day his pastor met him on the street and he began to relate to the pastor all of the tragedies and troubles that had come into his life. He said, “Pastor, it was enough to make me lose my religion.” The pastor looked at him and said, “Son, it should have been enough to make you *use* your religion.” But the problem was, he probably didn’t have true faith to begin with.

Do you have trials, Christian? Are you still holding to your faith? Then rejoice! It is a sign you are spiritually alive.

Now think about the second longer-term result of trials:

B. We Build Endurance – Again, James says in v.3, “knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” The word translated “patience” comes from *hypo*, which means primarily “under” and *meno* which means “to stay, to abide.” It is a picture of being under pressure and, instead of trying to escape; you stay there, and stand fast. It refers to steadfastness, endurance, and fortitude. Staying power is a fair representation of its meaning. God wants to produce in us perseverance, staying power, strength for the journey. Patience is not a passive acceptance of circumstances. It is a courageous perseverance to overcome your circumstances.

The Christian life is not like a 100-yard dash. It is more like a long-distance race, which requires great endurance to complete, & do well.

Why is it that we should rejoice in this product of trials? It is because perseverance is so important in life. Trials build in us this important character trait. You cannot succeed in life if you are constantly quitting. Endurance will help you through school. When I went to Bible College, I was surprised at the large number of students who dropped out. They did not endure. Endurance will help you succeed in sports. Endurance will help you grow stronger in the Christian life. Endurance is the key to many other blessings.

It is said that the more a tree is tossed about by fierce winds, the deeper its roots go. Those trees also develop stronger wood.

Well, the day will probably come when you will face a severe trial. You may lose a child. You may get a painful, life-threatening sickness. If you have not built up endurance through the years, you will not be a good witness for the Lord, and you will be totally defeated by that trial!

There is an analogy between our lives and the different kinds of boats we have nowadays. There is the rowboat, the sailboat, and the engine-powered boat. All three of them are able to carry loads. The rowboat can carry the least because its motion depends on the strength of those who row. The sailboat can carry a little more, for it is moved by the power of the wind. But there is a chance that the wind will toss the boat around quite a bit, and it will be difficult to reach the goal. The engine-powered, however, depends neither on human strength, nor on the winds, but on the power within, which will move it to its destination in spite of the weakness of human strength and the fury of outside circumstances. This is what Christ desires of us.

Do you have patient endurance? Are you a quitter, or do you persevere in carrying out your duties, or when you face trials? Well, if you have not developed this character quality, you still have a way to go. So let me show you one more thing you should do to have joy in trials:

#### IV. RECOGNIZE THE FINAL GOAL OF TRIALS

James says in v.4, “But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” The ultimate, final goal of allowing trials into our lives is that we might “be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” If we were honest we would admit that we all are lacking in at least some areas of our Christian lives. Well how can we overcome those areas of deficiency? Our text indicates that if we face trials, and endure trials in the right way, then the results of v.4 will be ours. Notice what God wants to accomplish in your life through trials.

A. He Wants to Bring About “Perfection” – Perfection (*teleios*), not endurance, is the ultimate goal of trials. Endurance is only the means to that end. What then is perfection? It is successful completion. It is the culmination of growth. For example, an oak tree is the perfection of an acorn. “So when you are feeling discouraged, and feeling a little blue; just take a look at a mighty oak, and see what a nut can do.” When you go through a trial, you are strengthened and acquire greater endurance, which will allow you to go through greater trials to bring about spiritual maturity. God is in the Christian growing business. Whatever comes into your life, good or bad, poverty or prosperity, triumph or tragedy, is for the purpose of growing you and maturing you in your faith and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. God wants you to be well-rounded, fully put together spiritually. We must become spiritual adults, and one important means to that end is the trials and tribulations of life patiently used. Oh, how we need mature Christians today!

Then James expands on the concept of perfection, or Christian maturity. He says that God is working to make us “complete, lacking nothing.” The word translated “complete” (*holokleeros*) means “complete in all its parts, in no part wanting or unsound, complete, entire, whole.” The word was used in reference to a body that was without blemish or defect. Morally, it means “free from sin, faultless.” So let the trials come. A proper response to trials will make a person whole and complete, a ripened character in which there is no defect and no inadequacy. In an absolute sense this condition will not be fully reached in this life (cf. 3:2), but trials patiently borne will bring us well along the way.

I read about a young Christian who was trying to get into the peach growing business. He had worked hard, invested everything he had in a peach orchard, which had blossomed beautifully. But then a late frost came, and it destroyed his entire crop. He didn’t go to church the next Sunday, or the next, or the next. So his pastor went to see him to find out why. The young fellow said, “Pastor, I’m not coming to church any more. Do you think I can worship a God who cares so little for me that he would let a frost kill all of my peaches?” The preacher replied kindly and wisely, “Son, God loves you better than he loves your peaches. You see, God understands that while peaches can grow without frost, Christians cannot grow without trials. God is not in the business of growing peaches; He’s in the business of growing Christians.”

So you need to understand that God allows trials in our lives because He is working to accomplish our full development. He wants us to be strong, mature, and complete.

Now what is our responsibility in this process? Well let’s see how we are to apply this teaching:

B. It Is Our Responsibility to Reach this Goal – God cannot build our character without our cooperation. James says in v.4, “But let patience have its perfect work...” This is a command in Greek. This is a command demanding submission to God’s purposes for the trial. The trial must be permitted to run its full course and have its full effect upon our lives to produce its full and proper fruits. Don’t fight the trial or focus on escaping it as quickly as possible. If you’re having trouble at work, it may not be God’s will for you to quit your job & find another one. Don’t try to insulate your lives from all possible trials. Accept them. “Let patience have its perfect work...” The only productive way out of a trial is through it.

God’s goal for our lives is maturity. It would be a tragedy if our children remained little babies. God spent 25 years working in Abraham before He could give him his promised son. God worked 13 years in Joseph’s life, putting him into various tests before He could put him on the throne of Egypt. He spent 80 years preparing Moses for 40 years of service. Our Lord took three years training His disciples, building their character. That training was culminated by the great trial

of the arrest & crucifixion of Jesus. So as we face the pressures and problems of life, let us seek not a passive acquiescence but rather a positive enthusiastic cooperation with God's plan for our lives.

Conclusion: So I hope that the next time you face a trial in your life, you remember these verses. What have we learned? Don't be distressed by trials; expect them. Fully consider the good work that God is accomplishing through your trials. He is testing your faith. He is building patient endurance, and He is maturing you, & completing your development. That is why you should rejoice as you face trials. God is accomplishing something good in your life. And finally, look at v.12. Here we see another good reason for facing your trials with joy, "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Sources: John MacArthur, Jr., *Benefiting from Life's Trials: Study Notes on James 1:2-18* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1988); James Merritt (notes from his sermon on this text); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); George Sweeting, *How to Solve Conflicts: A Practical Study of the Book of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature: James* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978); Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); Spiros Zodiates, *The Behavior of Belief: An Exposition of James Based Upon the Original Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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