

From Trials to Triumph

James 1:1-18

Key Verse: 12

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

This week we start a new book, the book of James, which was named after its author. It is one of the earliest books of the New Testament written about 15 years after the ascension of Christ. Most scholars believe that the author is the brother of Jesus. (Mt 13:55, Mk 6:3, Gal 1:19) What I think is interesting about James, is that originally he did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. (Jn 7:3-5) Growing up he didn't believe that Jesus was the son of God. However, it was after Jesus rose from the dead and visited James, that he had a change of heart and he came to believe that Jesus really was the Son of God. (1 Cor 15:7) After that James was transformed and devoted himself becoming a servant of God. Eventually James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and one of the pillars of the early Christian church. (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18, Gal 2:9)

His life of faith was not without challenges. From the moment he believed his faith was under attack. And it continued some twenty years after he wrote this book until the end of his life. The religious leaders threatened James because of the growth of the Jerusalem church. Expecting to discourage people from believing in Jesus, the religious leaders took James to the top of the temple before a large crowd, the same place where Satan tempted Jesus, and under the threat of death told James to renounce Jesus. At this crucial moment what did James do? Would he deny what he knew was true to save himself or stand up for what he believes in? James replied before the whole crowd, “Why do you ask me about Jesus, the Son of Man? He himself is sitting in heaven at the right hand of the great Power, and is about to come upon the clouds of heaven.” Realizing that they had miscalculated, the religious leaders, with great anger, threw James down from the pinnacle of the temple. He fell about 20 stories but it didn't kill him. Bleeding and dying, James knelt in prayer, praying for the forgiveness of the ones who were killing him. In a fit of rage, the Pharisees began stoning him right in front of the temple, when one of the priests cried out, “Stop! What are we doing? The man is praying for us,” but one among them took his staff and finished James off, literally crushing his skull with a club. In the end James was martyred for his faith in Jesus. As we begin this book, keep in mind that James was a man familiar with sufferings. He understood trials and thus he didn't write empty words. He was speaking from experience. He will show us how to go from trials to triumph instead of from trials to defeat. So please open your hearts as we listen to what James has to say about trials and temptations.

Let's take a look at verse 1. “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.” James describes himself to his readers as a servant of God and of Jesus Christ. James understands his life is not his own and others cannot know him without knowing the one he gives his life to in worship and service. He is known only in relationship to God and the Lord Jesus the one with whom he wants to be identified. He writes "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:" It seems likely that this letter was written before 50 a.d. to the Jewish Christians who were scattered probably due to persecution after Stephen's death. James writes this letter like a father writing to his children that are going

through some difficult hardship. He desires to help them to know the purpose to which God has called them and how to deal with the various trials they encounter as they live as Christians in a broken, sinful world.

Regarding trials James says in verse 2, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” Most people go out of their way avoiding hardship as much as they can. Modern life is driven by ease. We have escaladers & elevators to avoid walking up stairs. We have microwaves, TV remotes, cell phones and the internet to name just a few things that we’ve created to make our lives trial free. And even though we’ve gone through so much to avoid trials, still life is full of them. In fact we can’t avoid them. Notice that James doesn’t say “if” you face trials, he says “whenever” you face trials. He’s implying that we are going the face trials. And anyone that has lived in the world knows what he means and some have even come up with a saying to describe this: “Life is a \$%^&* and then you die.” Also notice in verse 2 that it says that we will face many kinds of trials, this talking about diversity. During our life we will face many favors of trials. You will face hardships in school, in family, in work, in health, in faith and relationships, nothing is immune. So we must be ready and prepared for when trials come. If you are not prepared, trials can consume you. But if you are prepared, they may still be hard but you can persevere.

Usually when we encounter life’s trials we rush to complain and wonder, “why me!” But James has a different view when facing trials, he says to consider them. When we consider something, this means that we think carefully about it or reflect upon them. Therefore when we face a trial, we shouldn’t rush to complain and condemn the situation, but rather reflect upon it and try to see what God wants us to learn through that situation. However James takes it even further and says that we should consider it pure joy when you face trials. When you first read this, you are tempted to think that James has gone crazy. Because who enjoys hardships, certainly not sane people. Humanly about the only way we can have joy when facing trials is to put on the happy face and pretend everything is ok, when in reality inside we just want to break down and cry. I don’t think James is saying that we should pretend that trials are easy to take, but that we should look beyond the difficulty to the spiritual benefit that trials bring. And it is then we can have the joy that comes from overcoming that trial. So it’s not that we receive joy from the trial itself, but from what we learn through it and our victory over it. Once when the apostles faced hardship before the Sanhedrin, afterward when they left they rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus’ name. (Acts 5:41)

Another reason we can have joy in trials is because of the fruit that it can produce in our lives. Take a look at verse 3. It says, “because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” Trials are for the testing of our faith. How can you know if you have sincere faith unless you are tested? How can you know if a structure is sound unless you put some weight upon it? A popsicle stick bridge design may look good, but how do you know unless you test it by putting a load on it. Testing is actually a good thing and trials are not a waste of time they are actually doing work, for the testing of our faith produces perseverance. And we have to “let perseverance finish its work (in us) so that we may be mature and complete.” (v3) Perseverance leads to maturity and completeness and eventually to eternal life (Rom 2:7). Paul enlarges on this and says that persevering in trials leads to purity, understanding, patience, kindness, and love. (2

Cor 6:3-7) Peter points out that perseverance is part of a process; that it is one step we have to go through to demonstrate that our faith is genuine.

Sometimes we may never understand the purpose of a trial or hardship. We may not be able to learn anything from it. And what you come to realize is that sometimes trials come into our life in order to draw us closer to God. Because it's through these hard times that we learn that we are not as great as we think we are and that we actually need God's mercy and his help. It's when there is nothing else that we can do except to go to God and depend upon him more and more and ourselves less and less. Don't you find that you pray more during trials? That's no accident. Sometimes trials are what I call relationship builders.

This is not an easy thing to do that's why James tells us in verse 5 to ask God for wisdom, because we're going to need it. "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." When we are in the midst of trials, often we can't see what is really going on or even think clearly. When you are in the middle of the storm you might start to panic, like disciples did when they were on the Sea of Galilee. We need help. We need good advice and encouragement. Sometimes advice can be disastrous. For example when Job underwent trials, his wife gave him some advice. After they lost their kids, their house, their possessions, it was like a tornado striking their town and wiping everything out. Job's wife's advice was to curse God and die. Not such good advice. James suggests that we go to God for wisdom, who better to ask than the one who created all things. For when we go to him he will give it generously and he's not going to point out all our mistakes in the process. I remember God's response to Solomon when he asked God for wisdom. The Lord was pleased and said, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice,"¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."¹³ Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings." (1 Ki 3:11-13) Isn't this a beautiful response.

The wisdom that James is speaking of is not just knowledge, but rather the ability to make wise decisions in difficult circumstances. It's about using the knowledge that God gives us in discerning ways. When Christians need wisdom, the first place to turn is to God in prayer. God is willing to give us wisdom, but we will be unable to receive it if our goals are self-centered rather than God-centered. Although wisdom originates with God, it comes to us in many ways: as a gift from God (Prov 2:6, Dan 2:21), as a gift from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:8, Eph 1:17), starting with a fear of the Lord (Job 28:28, Ps 111:10), from listening to wise people (Pr 1:2, 13:20), from discipline (Pr 29:15), from admonishing one another (Col 3:16), and from research and education (Ecc 1:13, 17, 7:25)

However there is something that we must do when we ask of God. Take a look in verses 6-8. "But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord."⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." When we come to God we must have faith and believe that our heavenly Father can and will help us. We cannot doubt. What is the point of prayer if we don't believe in the one we are praying to? If we

doubt then we are unstable, we are tossed about like a leaf in a wind storm. We have no foundation to stand upon. James says that we are double minded – that we give the appearance of belief but we don't really believe. A person like this should not expect to get anything from God.

In reality, trials are not the problem, because we are always going to have them, so it's really how we respond that is the problem. We can take two approaches to trials, we can either complain about them, or learn from them. In both cases we have to face trials but the outcome will be very different. If we face our trials with complaint and contempt, we will end up resentful and bitter. Our state after our trial will be worse than before we entered it. In a sense we will be burned up by our trial. Trials are like a refining fire and either we will be burned up or refined and made more pure by them. When we face our trials with faith in God, we can learn from them. In Hebrews we learn the point of hardships. "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?" (Heb 12:7) "because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." (Heb 12:6) "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness." (v12:9-10) "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (12:11) When we face trials, our attitude is so important that it can influence the outcome.

As Christians, we will face more trials than those who do not believe in Jesus because we have to face additional trials because of our faith. (James) When we experience these trials we must remember Jesus. He said have faith I have overcome the world. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33)

Sometimes in the middle of trials all we can do is persevere. And that's all we are called to do. But the great thing about perseverance is that it brings blessing. Let's read verse 12. "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him." When we stand firm (1 Cor 15:58) during the time of trials, persevering, we will prove that we are genuine. We stand the test and reveal the quality of our faith. Then we will receive the crown of life. Our Christian life is not a sprint to the finish, it's like a marathon and when we persevere we will win the victory.

[Sometimes we may start to feel sorry for ourselves when we experience trials. James gives an example of being poor. We may feel sad because of our low social-economic position in life, but James encourages believers not to wallow in their self pity about their low earthly position but to take pride in their high spiritual position. But James also gives a warning to the believers that have more money. The believers that are rich should not take pride in their money and become arrogant and self satisfied. That kind of believer needs to remember that they are identified with one who is meek and lowly, despised by the world. For our life will not last forever, it will disappear before we know it, like a wilting flower. (v10-11) The Pharaohs of Egypt buried all kinds of treasure with them when they died hoping to take their vast wealth with them into the afterlife. But their treasure didn't go with them, it stayed behind for the grave robbers to take.]

James sees a connection between trials and temptations. One of the toughest challenges Christians under trial face is temptation. One of the temptations that we may have when we face trials is to think that God doesn't care about us, or maybe we question God's goodness, or even his very existence. James reminds us that no matter how difficult our circumstances may be, God is always working for our good. Verses 16-17 say, "¹⁶Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

According to the dictionary, a trial is "a test of faith, patience, or stamina by suffering or temptation." A temptation is "an enticement to do something wrong by promise of pleasure or gain." Temptation itself can be a trial. Temptation comes from evil desires inside us, not from God. It begins with an evil thought and becomes sin when we dwell on that thought and allow it to become an action. People who live for God sometimes wonder why they still have temptation and does God tempt them? No. God tests people but he does not tempt them by trying to seduce them into sin. However God does allow Satan to tempt people in order to refine their faith and help them grow in their dependence on Christ. We shouldn't ever confuse temptation with God's testing your faith as a way to strengthen it. It's not a sin to be tempted. Temptations come to all of us even Jesus was tempted. However it's when we act on that temptation that it becomes sin. And if sin is not challenged, it will ultimately result in eternal spiritual death. Persevering under trials brings life, but succumbing to temptation brings death.

Let's read verse 18. "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." We have been given everything we need to be successful in overcoming trials and temptations. We have been given the word of God, the Bible to help us, the Holy Spirit and friends around us to encourage us. So the next time you face a trial make a note of what your initial reaction is because that we reveal where your faith is. Do you grumble about it or does it cause you to cry out to God? Trials and temptations in themselves are neutral – they just reveal our true condition. If you are like me, you don't always react one way or the other. Sometimes we are victorious, good for you, and sometimes we fail and that's when we need to repent and draw closer to our Lord Jesus Christ. We can look to James and see his response to what was maybe the biggest trial of his life. When he was being persecuted he got down on his knees and prayed. Not for himself, but for those persecuting him. He prayed, "father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." That sounds familiar, because it is the same prayer that Jesus prayed while he hung from the cross. From this we can see James spiritual maturity for all those trials were making him more like Jesus, which is our goal. May God bless you as you face the trials of your life. And I sincerely pray that you may go from trials to triumph.