

James: sermon #1
Turning trials into triumphs
(James 1:1-12)

Introduction (James 1:1)

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

We begin this series in the book of James with three understandings concerning this New Testament epistle:

a. Its author

We understand its author to be James, half-brother of Jesus, who humbly identifies himself as “servant of God and of the Lord his Lord Jesus Christ.” Tradition says that his service ended with martyrdom in A.D. 62. This letter was probably written in about 48—making it the earliest New Testament book. James was leader of the Jerusalem church in a time of upheaval and trial. Many Christian Jews in Jerusalem still observed the old covenant law (Acts 21:20). The temple and its services were still in operation. The controversies addressed in the A.D. 49 Jerusalem conference were yet unresolved.

b. Its original audience

We understand that James wrote to Jewish Christians dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. They are “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1b).

c. Its purpose

We understand that the book addresses the needs and problems of these dispersed Jewish Christians. For one thing, they were going through difficult trials. They also faced temptations to sin. Some were catering to the rich, while others were being robbed by the rich. Church members were competing for church offices. Many failed to live what they professed to believe. The control of the tongue was a serious problem. So was worldliness. Some were disobeying God’s Word and were sick physically because of it; and some were straying away from the Lord and the church.

The common denominator in all these problems was ***spiritual immaturity***. These Christians simply were not growing up. Thus the basic theme of the letter is ***the marks of maturity in the Christian life***. James used the words *mature* and *perfect* several times (1:4, 17, 25; 2:22; 3:2). A “perfect man” (3:2) is spiritually mature, balanced and grown-up—a person sharing fully in the love and life of Jesus. What is needed to achieve this spiritual maturity? James addresses growing in spiritual maturity through trials. No matter the trials on the outside (1:1–12) or the temptations on the inside (1:13–27), through Jesus we grow in expressing his love and life. James offers four imperatives for experiencing this victory in Jesus through trials: a joyful attitude, an understanding mind, a surrendered will, and a believing heart.

1. A joyful attitude (1:2)

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...

Outlook determines outcome. God tells us to *expect trials*. It is not “if you face trials” but “*whenever* you face trials.” The believer who expects his Christian life to be easy is in for a shock. Jesus warned his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Paul told his converts that “we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Some trials come simply because we are human—sickness, accidents and disappointments. Other trials come because we are Christians. As Peter wrote, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you” (1 Peter 4:12). Satan fights us, the world opposes us, and this makes for a life of battle. But do not be discouraged, rather stop to “consider” (James 1:2)—evaluate trials in the light of what God is doing for us through them. As we do, joy replaces discouragement. Remember Jesus who was able to endure the cross because of “the joy set before him” (Heb. 12:2).

Of course, our values shape these evaluations. If we value comfort more than character, then trials will upset us. If we value the material and physical more than the spiritual, we will not be able to “consider it pure joy.” If we live only for the present and forget the future, then trials will make us bitter, not better. Job had the right outlook when he said, “But he knows the way that I take: when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). So, when trials come, immediately give thanks to the Lord and adopt a joyful attitude. “But how,” we may ask, “is it possible to have a joyful attitude in the midst of trials?” The second imperative explains this.

2. An understanding mind (1:3)

3 ...because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

What do Christians know that makes it easier to face trials and benefit from them?

a. Faith will be tested

When God called Abraham to live by faith, he tested him in order to increase that faith. God always tests us to bring out the *best*; Satan tempts us to bring out the *worst*. The testing of our faith proves that we are born again.

b. Testing works for us, not against us

The word *testing* can be translated “approval.” Peter writes: “These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold...may be proved genuine” (1 Peter 1:7). A gold prospector brings ore into the assayer’s office to be tested. The sample itself may not be worth more than a few dollars, but the *approval*—the official statement about the ore—is worth millions! It assures the prospector that he has a gold mine. God’s approval, his “testing” of our faith is precious, because it assures us that our faith is genuine. Thus trials work *for* the believer, not *against* him. Paul said, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called

according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28); and, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:17).

c. Trials produce spiritual maturity

What does God want to produce in our lives through testing our faith? “We...glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope” (Rom. 5:3–4). In the Bible, *perseverance* is not a passive acceptance of circumstances. It is courageous enduring through suffering and difficulty. Immature people are always impatient; mature people are patient and persistent. “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Heb. 10:36). When the believer learns to persevere and wait on the Lord, then God can do great things for him. Abraham ran ahead of the Lord, married Hagar, and brought great sorrow into his home (Gen. 16). Moses ran ahead of God, murdered a man, and had to spend forty years with the sheep to learn patience (Ex. 2:11ff). God develops patience and character in our lives through trials. Knowing this, we can face trials joyfully.

3. A surrendered will (1:4, 9–12)

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything....

9 The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. 10 But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. 11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. 12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Our perseverance in trials yields spiritual maturity because we are cooperating with God’s good work in us. If we resist that work, God may further try us so that we will learn to submit. But as we submit—as we ‘stand the test’—God’s good will for us (“the crown of life”) becomes ours.

God does not work in and through us without our cooperation—and that cooperation involves a surrendered will. A spiritually mature Christian does not argue with God’s will; instead, they accept it willingly and obey it joyfully. “Doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph. 6:6). If we try to go through trials without surrendered wills, we will end up more like immature children than mature adults.

In 1:9–11, James applies this principle to two different kinds of Christians: the poor and the rich. Money and social status were real problems among these Christians (see James 2:1–7, 15–16; 4:1–3, 13–17; 5:1–8). But God’s testing’s have a way of leveling us. When testing comes to the yielded poor Christian, he will let God have his way and rejoices that he possesses spiritual riches that cannot be taken from him. When testing comes to the yielded rich Christian, he also lets God have his way, and rejoices that his riches in

Christ cannot wither or fade away. In other words, it is not your material resources that take you through the testing's of life; it is your spiritual resources. Rich or poor, the key to triumph through trials is a surrendered will.

So now we have three imperatives from James for experiencing victory in Jesus through trials: a joyful attitude; an understanding heart and a surrendered will. He now gives a fourth.

4. A believing heart (1:5–8, 12)

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. 6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

The people to whom James wrote had problems with their praying (4:1–3; 5:13–18). When we are going through God-ordained difficulties, what should we pray about? James gives the answer: ask God for *wisdom*. James has a great deal to say about wisdom (1:5; 3:13–18). The Jewish people were lovers of wisdom, as the book of Proverbs gives evidence. Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. Why is this needed when we are going through trials? Why not ask for strength, or grace, or deliverance? For this reason: *we need wisdom so we will not waste the opportunities God is giving us to mature*. Wisdom helps us understand how to use these circumstances for our good and God's glory. James not only explained *what* to ask for (wisdom), but he also described *how* to ask. We are to ask in faith. We do not have to be afraid, for God is anxious to answer, and he will never scold us! "He gives us more grace" (4:6). Part of that grace is more and more wisdom that comes in the midst of trials.

The greatest enemy to answered prayer is unbelief. James compares the doubting believer to the waves of the sea, up one minute and down the next. So it is with a "double-minded" person. Faith says, "Yes!" but unbelief says, "No!" Then doubt comes along and says "Yes!" one minute and "No!" the next. It was doubt that made Peter sink in the waves as he was walking to Jesus (Matt. 14:22–33). Jesus asked him, "You of little faith...why did you doubt?" When Peter started his walk of faith, he kept his eyes on Christ. But when he was distracted by the wind and waves, he ceased to walk by faith; and he began to sink. He was double-minded, and he almost drowned.

Many Christians live like corks on the waves: up one minute, down the next; tossed back and forth. This kind of experience is evidence of immaturity. Paul used a similar idea in Ephesians 4:14—"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming." If we have believing and united hearts, we can ask in faith and God will give the wisdom we need. Instability and immaturity go together.

Conclusion

James closed this section with a beatitude: “Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). He started (1:2) and ended with joy. This beatitude is a great encouragement because it promises a “crown of life” to those who patiently endure trials. This “crown” has to do with rewards for our works of faith—the principal one in view here being the reward of wisdom. In our walk of faith it is first the cross (trials, suffering), then the crown (rewards, including wisdom). God does not help us by removing the tests, but by making the tests work for our benefit.

Note in 1:12, James’ use of the word *love*. We might expect him to write, “the crown of life that God has promised to those who *trust* him” or “who *obey* him.” Why did James use *love*? Because love is the spiritual motivation behind every imperative in this section. We have a joyful attitude in trials because we love God, and he loves us, and will not harm us. We have an understanding mind because he loves us and has shared his truth with us, and we love him in return. We have a surrendered will because we love him. Why do we have a believing heart? Because love and faith go together. When you love someone, you trust them and do not hesitate to ask them for help. Love is thus the spiritual force behind the imperatives James gives us here. If we love God, we will have no problem counting, knowing, letting, and asking.

But there is another factor involved: love keeps us faithful to the Lord. The double-minded person (1:8) is like an unfaithful husband or wife: he wants to love both God and the world. James admonished, “Purify your hearts you double-minded!” (4:8). The Greek word translated *purify* literally means “make chaste.” The picture is that of an unfaithful lover.

The Christian who loves God, and who knows that God loves him, will not fall apart when God permits trials to come. *He is secure in God’s love*. He is not double-minded, trying to love both God and the world. God’s purpose in allowing trials in our lives is to grow us in maturity—to grant us the blessing of wisdom. Let’s cooperate with that purpose: “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (TNIV). “Let your endurance come to its perfect product so that you may be fully developed and perfectly equipped” (Williams). May it be so with us!

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

This issue continues a series in the book of James with material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe, Luke Timothy Johnson (*The Letter of James, Anchor Bible*) & Peter David (New Bible Commentary).

Scripture is quoted from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright International Bible Society.

Note: Bold script above covered in Worship Services.