

JAMES 1:1-12 “FACING TRIALS”

INTRODUCTION

How can some Christians seem to be able to stand up under even the most severe trials? Take Corrie ten Boom for example. I sure many of you have heard of her – she was a Christian in the Netherlands before the 2nd World War, but then the Nazis invaded. She and her family became very active hiding many Jews from certain death. But she and her family were then arrested and sent to the concentration camp – eventually ending up in Ravensbruck. She watched her sister die there. Yet since the war, after going through all of that, there is no bitterness in her. She even met one of the camp guards after her release and forgave him.

How does someone go through that kind of trial and not become bitter? How is it in some people even the hardest trials draw them closer to God, rather than leading them to deny their faith. Does it come down to personality? Luck? The support of friends?

At the very start of his letter James gives us something on an answer. He writes and teaches us how to deal with trials in such a way that rather than destroying us, they build us up. And there are 3 things I think we need to notice in these first 12 verses.

THINK ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF THE TRIALS (Vs 2-4)

James is refreshingly realistic about the lives Christians live. He’s not one of those teachers who pretends that life suddenly becomes perfect and easy once you become a Christian – have you heard preachers like that? No, James expects that we will all face difficulties. “Whenever you face trials of many kinds”. Trials, difficulties, unpleasant circumstances, things which test our faith and trust in God are just part of the life we live this side of glory.

And when James talks about trials he deliberately casts his net widely. We’ll see in a moment that there are particular trials and difficulties that his original readers were facing, but what God says through James here has application to everything we face. There are “trials of many kinds”.

That's important to see, because often we can think that God doesn't care about the particular trials we are facing, or that the bible has nothing to say about the particular trials we are facing. No – James is talking about trials of many kinds. Whether it's poverty or debt, or difficulties with family or friends, or loneliness or struggle with singleness, or illness, or the effects of other people's sin on you, they all fall into this category of "trials of many kinds".

So how do we deal with them? We are all facing some kind of trial. I expect some of us are facing serious, deeply painful trials at the moment. Well what James says is shocking, almost offensive. We are to "consider it pure joy". Consider, reckon, think about your trials, consider it joy. That's very strange. Why does James say this. Is he a masochist? Asking us to be people who love pain, who enjoy suffering? "I've got cancer you say – how wonderful". "You're dumping me, great! I was so looking forward to you doing that to me". No. Of course he's not.

Neither is he asking us to simply indulge in positive thinking. You know, the kind of thinking that believes that if you just think positive thoughts you can pull through any trauma. The problem is that positive thinking often has no bearing on the reality of what's going on. No – James knows they are trials. He's not asking us not to be upset, or not to cry, or grieve, or feel pain. He's not asking us to pretend, or put a brave face on to the world or to God.

No. James gives a reason as to why we can consider it pure joy. Why we can consider, think about trials as joy. And it's there in verses 3 and 4. "because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" James says when trials come, we should look beyond the trials to see why they come. There is a purpose to difficulties. God is not out of control. He is doing something in you and me.

What's he doing? He's maturing us, if we are Christians. He's growing us up. There is a process in view in verses 3 and 4.

We have faith (we trust Jesus), but God wants that faith to be strong, so he allows trials so that keep going keep trusting him so our faith is strengthened. So we build the muscle of our faith to keep going, keep trusting in him throughout life. So we can be mature Christians, not just childlike Christians who only trust God because of the good things he gives us now.

If you were to walk into my study, you would see pinned up on the wall a schedule which claims to be able to take anyone to go from being a complete novice to be able to run a 5 kilometre race, in 8 weeks. It is a plan which week by week gradually builds up your endurance by running different lengths at a time, a number of times a week. And if you want to be a runner you need to learn that kind of endurance. You need to use your muscles. You need to go through the pain of training to become a persevering runner, who will become a mature runner who can run. You can't achieve that simply by sitting in your study. I know, because I've not got round to following it!

God knows we need to grow in that kind of perseverance so he uses trials to achieve that in our lives. It is easy to trust God when life is going well.

It is easy to say we believe God is in control when our life is running smoothly, because if we were God that's how we'd control things. BUT our belief that God is in control is put to the test when things get difficult. Our trust in a sovereign God is really seen when we face an uncertain future (perhaps with jobs – I've found that). We can say we believe in God's love and care towards us when we are surrounded by loving friends and family (and perhaps we don't need his love), but our real belief in God's care and love to us will be shown when people disappoint us and hurt us. We may say we are looking forward to when Jesus comes again when life is going well and we've got a nice house and car, but it is only really seen when we have very little in this world.

Do you see why we can count it pure joy in trials? We can only do this if we see what God is doing. If we see that God wants us to grow in faith and keep going with him.

PRAY FOR WISDOM IN TRIALS (Vs 5-11)

Now you may be thinking, that's all easier said than done. Verses 2 and 3 and 4 are perhaps verses we memorise, but are very difficult to really believe when the trials come, and they will.

It is so different to how we naturally think about difficulties, and completely alien to how the rest of the world thinks about trials. How can we actually put that into practice? How can we "consider it pure joy"?

Well that's where James' second point comes. Ask God for wisdom in trials (verses 5-11). It might look as if James is moving onto talk about something completely different, but he's not. He's still on the theme of trials. It's as if he is saying "if you find yourself in a trial, and really can't see what God is doing, if you are struggling to count it joy, if you are struggling to see it from God's perspective as something which will strengthen your faith and mature you, then ask God for his wisdom". Ask God to help you see things from his perspective. That's what wisdom is – the God given ability to see life and live life from his perspective, fearing him, loving him, even in trials.

And do you see that verse 5 is one of the great promises in the bible. God longs to give us this wisdom. If we ask for this wisdom, this ability to see trials in the right way, he will give it to us. He is the giving God. He will give, even though we have failed him (without finding fault). So perhaps you've been struggling with a trial for a long time. Perhaps you know you've responded to that trial badly. Don't let that stop you coming to God and asking him for the ability to see it rightly. Ask for his wisdom.

But what we do need though, when we ask God for this wisdom is sincerity. "When he asks, he must believe and not doubt".

I was watching one of those property programmes on TV recently – you know, the ones where you watch some people renovating a house either to sell, or because they want to live in their dream home. Not always great for contentment! In this one, this guy was renovating the house himself, and to do what he wanted to do, he had to knock down a wall.

The wall he wanted to knock down was load bearing – it was vital for the support of the house (he was going to replace it), so he'd put some metal supports up, and just before he was going to knock it down he called in an engineer just to check he had enough supports up. But the engineer said he didn't, and really he needed to put 4 more supports on the other side to make sure the whole house didn't collapse.

But what he did was, wait for the engineer to leave and then he carried on demolishing the wall without the extra supports. It was dangerous, and also stupid. I thought – what was the point of getting expert advice, if you are not going to follow it.

That's the kind of doubt James is talking about. If we want God's perspective on our difficulties we can pray and God will give it, but we must sincerely want to hear the answer. The doubt here is not about having questions about our faith (occasional doubts about whether God exists, or if Jesus rose from the dead), but it's about doubting whether we really want to live life God's way.

Do we really want God's perspective on our struggles? Or when we hear it, and we going to go on in our own way, not considering them pure joy.

And in verses 9 to 11 James gives an illustration of God's wisdom on particular trials, presumably the trials his readers were facing. Poverty, humble circumstances are always a trial, but if you look at them from God's perspective you can see that if you are a Christian and poor you are in a high position, a child of the king and poverty is God's means of making you hungry for him. If you are rich and a Christian, that too is a trial, you should recognise your riches count for nothing in God's sight so don't give in to their attraction.

Both are trying circumstances. Both need God's wisdom, because how we'd naturally feel about those situations is very different.

So the call here is to keep praying. Keep asking God. Keep bringing your lives and all your circumstances to God and ask "what are you doing in my life". Help me to have your perspective on my life. Help me to grow in my faith and persevere.

And do it sincerely, really wanting to, not wanting to hear God's answer, but carrying on living life your own way. That leads to instability and immaturity, rather than perseverance and a mature faith.

LOOK TO THE OUTCOME OF TRIALS (Vs 12)

So, in the trials we all face in our life we are to think about their purpose, pray for God's wisdom, and then thirdly James says we are to look to the final outcome (verse 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"

James says – look to the end, the final result. Even perseverance, even maturity has a purpose.

Runners don't just train to build up perseverance, they build up perseverance to finish the race, the build up perseverance to win.

You see, none of this will make sense if we are simply living for this world. If simply having a good life is our aim, then we will never count it "pure joy" in trials.

But James says, if we are to have God's perspective on trials we need to have his perspective on the whole of eternity. We are living for a purpose. There is something great to come. We need perseverance so we reach the goal.

One of the great summary statements of what Christians believe is the "perseverance of the saints". And that summary statement of what the Bible teaches is important to hold onto. It is a great promise – if you are a Christian God will keep you until the end. It does mean "once saved always saved" (a popularised form of that belief). But there is another just as important aspect of that statement. To believe in the perseverance of the saints is to believe that the mark of the saint, a mark of a true Christian is that they persevere. A true Christian keeps going. A true Christian stands up under trials. God's keeps the Christian going in difficulties.

And do you see why we keep going. What our ultimate purpose, goal is? The crown of life God has promised. The crown which is life, true life,

eternal life is relationship with Jesus Christ, which yes has started now, but what we have now is nothing compared to what's to come in the future.

Perhaps you're slightly unsettled by talk of crowns or rewards. But a good way to look at it is like this. Imagine a guy who falls in love with a girl. So he sets about trying to get her attention, he makes friends with her, he builds her trust, they get to know each other over a long period of time. Then he gets to their wedding day. Is he rewarded for all his effort and waiting? Yes he is. But he's rewarded with the marriage relationship with the girls he loves. The reward isn't payment or a prize, not it's relationship. And that's the reward we have in store as Christians – the fulfilment of the relationship, the fulfilment of the faith we have now. The crown that is life – full, deep relationship with Jesus Christ, who said "I am the life". And when that comes, will we think back to our trials and, whatever they are, think they were worth it. Yes! The trials that perhaps seem never ending now have an end point, and that end point is worth

So what do we do in the meantime? Well all we have to do is what it says at the end of verse 12. "Love him". Love Jesus.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What does James expect we will meet in our lives (see verse 2)? What kinds of things do you think this includes?

How should we "count" those experiences? Is this how we would naturally deal with them?

How can we "count it all joy"? What do we need to know to be able to do that?

Why is "steadfastness" so important? How can God use trials to produce that? How have you experienced that in your life?

What promise are we given in verse 5? Why might we need wisdom in the midst of trials?

In verses 6-8 we are told about the danger of doubting when we ask for wisdom. What kind of doubt are the verses talking about? (Look up 4:7-8 for another reference to “double minded” which may help you)

Verses 9-11 give examples of particular kinds of trials we may go through, and how to respond to them. Does anything surprise you about the examples?

What is the final outcome of our steadfastness in verse 12?

Who receives the crown of life? Are these verses just about “hanging on” in difficulties? (Answer - No, we love Jesus!)