

Sermon for Sunday, June 5, 2011
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The Trials of Life
James 1:2-12

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 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. 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. 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. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

If someone tells the truth in the wrong way, at the wrong time, it can bring dismay rather than help. Imagine, for example, that a man has planned a week-long wilderness hike in the mountains for a year, only to break a small bone in his foot just before departure. There will be no permanent damage, his physician reports, but he must cancel the trip and stay off the foot for two weeks. Word of the injury spreads through the man's church, and a man arrives at his doorstep, wielding a large Bible. "Cheer up," he booms, "I found a passage in James, some Scripture that addresses your very situation." He then reads James 1:2-4: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials..."

"So," the meddler continues, "be glad this happened, for God intends to strengthen your character through it." At this point, the would-be hiker might be seized by an urge to snatch the Bible from his counselor's hands and use it as a blunt object to knock some sense into him.

Of course, God can use all of life's sorrows – and all its joys - to bring believers to maturity. But it is misleading to use James 1 as the first word in grief counseling. When Jesus met Mary and Martha, after their brother Lazarus died, he did not say, "God has a purpose in this" - even though he knew God did. First he comforted them, then he wept with them (John 11:19, 34). To use James for grief counseling is to miss its primary intent.

When James says believers should rejoice in trials because they test our faith and develop maturity, he addresses more than the hour of crisis or sorrow. James wants the church to live out its faith in the crucible of life, in all its tests. This includes tests born of hardship, such as accidents, sickness, poverty, and anxiety, but it also includes trials that spring from prosperity, such as wealth, knowledge, skill, and high position. Both hardship and prosperity test our faith. Either one can prove a profession of faith to be genuine or specious. Hardship brings obvious trials, but success sifts us too. "Test" and "trial" are interchangeable (Peirasmos).

James has more in mind than the truism, "We grow strong through adversity." James wants us to see the world a certain way. The goal of life is not to find maximum pleasure, but for holiness. God fashions maturity and endurance by means of the trials that befall us. Do we take responsibility and endure, or doubt and blame God? Our response to trials reveals our heart condition. His word about trials, therefore, speaks to more than hospital rooms, flooded farmlands, or unemployment lines. He speaks to all of life when he says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds," for God brings us to maturity by them. This is James' first teaching and it holds for all of life.

Life and its trials

James says the trials of life will probe whether we live by our professed doctrines or not. He says life will try us, proving our faith authentic or inauthentic. In life's tests, abstract theology will not suffice. Genuine Christians fail some tests, of course. James does not think that everyone who succumbs to a foolish idea or a sinful desire is an unbeliever. But faithfulness during trials does prove that our faith is genuine and mature.

We must see the world as a place of constant testing. Rather than blaming God for this (1:13-15), we should regard it as joy, because trials produce maturity, especially if we seek God's wisdom in them (1:5). James mentions several tests; for example, both poverty and riches can try us.

Poverty and riches as trials (1:9-11)

Nearly everyone agrees that poverty is a trial. The poor man has a humble position James says (1:9). In that day, the poor went about hungry, with little clothing and minimal legal protections (2:15, 5:1-6).

Unlike the trial of poverty, quite a few people might volunteer to face the trial of wealth. Indeed, the life of the rich is trouble-free in some ways, but as possessions multiply, so do cares and temptations. The rich are prone to pride and self-sufficiency, James says, somewhat obliquely: "The one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower." Like a flower in scorching heat, "the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business." By reminding the wealthy of their weakness, he corrects the pride that is their bane.

In truth, God singles out neither the rich nor the poor for **special** testing (1:13). The poor must remember they have an exalted position in God's eyes (1:9). The rich must remember the dangers of materialism. They must believe their life is fleeting, impermanent, and beyond their control, as it is for everyone else (1:10-11).

Other trials

As James sees it, knowledge tries us too, for we must act upon everything we know. If we know of a need, we must meet it (2:15-17). If we know enough to teach others (3:1) we will be judged more strictly. That is, God will hold us accountable to live out what we know. If we are aware of a moral obligation, we must meet it. James says, "Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it, sins" (4:17).

Our abilities and ambitions also test us:

- The tongue has the capacity to accomplish great things. Yet the misused tongue is a devouring fire (3:1-9).
- Our energy and ambitions tempt us to become confident in our own strength. We make plans to accomplish great things and to become rich, forgetting that apart from God's sustaining power, we will not live another hour (4:13-16).
- Illness tests us (5:13-18). It can lead believers closer to God in prayer or can cause bitterness and despair, which are contrary to faith.

We can extrapolate from riches, the tongue, and ambition to other abilities that try us. Those who possess supreme athletic ability or physical beauty reap adulation and untold favors, so they may learn to rely on a wink and a touchdown pass and neglect their character. Leaders are tempted to talk naïve followers into anything they wish and to pressure the rest to comply with their desires.

Thus, times of severe, focused testing will meet us, but every season and circumstance of life tries our faith in some way, testing whether it is genuine or not. For that we should be thankful, says James, for daily trials prove the authenticity of our faith. If someone doubts this proposal, let him tour some of the stages of life, beginning with a high school senior.

All of life is a trial

A high school senior lives in tension. He is, at long last, king of the hill, the privileged one. On the other hand, classes are still long and boring, homework is still banal. At home, he still faces curfews and chores. He looks around and asks, "Is this what I've been waiting for all my life? There must be more! I'm tired of school, tired of books, tired of teachers' dirty looks. I'm tired of my room, my mall, my activities. I can't wait to get out on my own, to do a thousand new things. When graduation comes, then my trials will be over."

So our young man goes to college. He is free! But he is a chemistry major, perpetually in the lab, and working part time to cover his expenses. By his senior year, he has a serious girlfriend. They begin to think about marriage, but haven't been together long enough to be sure when he gets a job in Dallas, 800 miles from his sweetheart, who will be teaching third grade. Absence makes their hearts grow fonder. They work harder than ever to master their new professions, but they are lonely and tired of kissing their telephones good night.

They decide to marry. That night, they gaze into each other's eyes and say, "We will be together forever. Now our trials are over." They set up house in a small apartment. On his first day of work, he showers and starts to shave, but he can hardly see himself, because her "things" are everywhere. And how she spends money! What's more, she still expects him to demonstrate his love with flowers. He thinks, "What do you mean, you want 'tokens of love'? I married you. Why do you need tokens?"

Of course, he causes a few trials, too. At the table he eats as if he were back at the fraternity. When he sleeps, he thrashes about their bed as if he is re-enacting an Olympic decathlon.

Eventually, that trial is over; now they want a baby. But one year, then two years, go by without success. But then, just as they prepare to meet with physicians, she conceives! They say, "Now our trials are over!"

I will not recount the trials of pregnancy – the nausea and mood swings. Let us travel forward for eight months. They have a healthy girl. Mother and daughter leave the hospital to spend their first night at home. The baby is asleep and the parents lie in bed thinking, "Our marriage is strong, our baby is home. At last, our trials are over." They drift off to sleep.... Then, in an instant, they're awake! The baby is crying! Why? She's not hungry or wet. She's crying *for no reason!* So the trials of parenthood begin. In every stage of a child's life, parents tell themselves the next phase will be easier.

- When we can sleep through the night, when the baby can understand us and we can understand her, when we are done with diapers – then it will be easier.
- When they are old enough to go to school, so mother can have a little peace.
- When they are more independent. When they can drive, so we no longer spend endless hours chauffeuring them to soccer games and clarinet lessons. Yes, when they can drive, then our trials will be over.
- When they go to college and can stop wondering where they are. They may never come in, but at least we won't know. Then our trials will be over.

Work is no different. Trials never end, things never settle down. If the economy is thriving, the company is growing, and our work is respected, there is too much to do. The trials are overwork and exhaustion. If the economy is cool or there is not enough business, then income is down and jobs are in jeopardy.

Trials continue after retirement. We miss the camaraderie, the respect, the friendships of work. We have too much time on our hands. We wonder if we care too much about golf or fishing. Health issues surface. And we may wonder if we laid aside enough money to fund the next twenty years. From our childhood home to the retirement home, trials are constant. We need James' message on trials, a message we now trace from the earlier verses of Chapter 1.

The proper response to trials (1:2-4)

James addresses his first word to "my brothers" that is, his fellow believers: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (1:2-3). "Consider" means we must make a mental judgment about trials. From our vantage point, most trials seem like tragic accidents. Yet James says we should rejoice, for they have a purpose. They can strengthen our faith.

James says, "You know" testing produces perseverance, because we ought to know: trials produce character. We do not rejoice over the trial itself, nor do we feign indifference to pain. Rather, disciples should be like women who rejoice to learn that they carry a child. The woman knows she faces a painful childbirth, but she rejoices because she looks past the adversities to the birth of her child. So it is with the Christian.

In the midst of hardship, people sometimes guess what they should learn from it. They say, "The Lord will teach me patience through this," or, "I will learn to trust God more completely." The Lord can indeed deepen patience or trust through trial. But James does not say trial produces one particular virtue. Rather, James 1:4 says perseverance leads to maturity in general: "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (1:4). Trials lead to well-rounded virtue. There is no virtue that trials cannot build. There is no defect trials cannot remedy, no strength trials cannot impart.

The wrong response to trials

When immersed in intense trials, people commonly ask the wrong questions: Why is this happening to me? Whose fault is this? Is it the result of my sin? Is this a random consequence of living in a fallen world? Instead, we should ask how we can grow to maturity through our trial.

Some people tell themselves, "No one knows the trial I must endure. If they did, they would never say it can strengthen me." Perhaps no human knows your sorrow. But God knows all our sorrows, and He says, "Rejoice in trials."

The greatest trial can at least teach us to seek God afresh. Severe suffering can break us down, and terminal illness hardly strengthens us for this life, but they still prepare believers for eternity. We rejoice in trials because our faith becomes mature through them (1:4).

But we need wisdom to discern the meaning of the trial. We must believe that God intends our good, that He allows trials because we need them (1:5-6).

How we need trials – an illustration

I discovered my need for trials when I was a college professor, living near campus. I would walk home quietly, along a tree-shaded street, arriving refreshed around 5:30. The minutes before supper are difficult for mothers of small children. Hungry children are whine and quarrel, but mothers can't focus on them while they finish dinner.

Each night I strode in the door and sized up the situation. If everyone was happy, we had time for a romp or story. If they misbehaved, I coolly analyzed the scene: Did they require gentle discipline? Loving attention? A new activity? What voice should I use? The gentle one or the authoritative one? Should I stand beside them, towering over them? Or should I kneel down and look them in the eye? I relished the role of "wise father;" my children were like putty in my hands. I often wondered why other parents could not guide their children as easily as I.

Then Debbie went to the hospital for a week, then for two more weeks on bed rest. Life was hard when she was in the hospital: I played mother, father, cook, dishwasher, and caretaker. When she returned, I became nurse, too. Now I had to leave work early, with tasks unfinished, to prepare dinner as the children whined at me for a change. The more I was home, the less impact my special voices had. I no longer had time to bend over and look each child in the eye for every utterance.

My control slipped away. I wore out. I began delivering messages more loudly. I was explaining "why" less and uttering threats more. My wife didn't say anything as she witnessed all this from her post on the floor. She just tilted her head and caught my eye. The look, said, "So where is the wise father now?"

What had gone wrong? I was in a trial and my weaknesses were showing. I saw my false pride, my lack of genuine self-control, my need of grace. This trial helped me develop perseverance as a father. The trial revealed my weaknesses. I was not so masterful as I dreamed. The trial let me repent and begin to develop endurance and maturity as a father.

I never rejoiced that my wife fell ill, but I was thankful for the lessons her illness taught me. Just so, James does not command disciples to rejoice in illnesses per se, but we should rejoice in the lessons we learn in them. At a minimum, trials expose our weaknesses so we know where we must grow. They reveal our need of a Savior. This applies to success. Riches tempt us to hedonism. Success tempts us to pride. "What I can afford?" becomes the standard, not "What does God want?"

Wisdom to learn from trials (1:5-8)

James says the goal of trials is "that you may be mature and complete, not **lacking** anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God..." The goal, says James, is that we "lack nothing" spiritually. But to turn tests into maturity, the one thing you must not lack is wisdom. Trials don't always lead to spiritual growth. Suffering can create fear, despair, a determination to "look out for number one" or anger toward God. Abundance can lead to selfish indulgence. Therefore, James now says, we need to ask God for wisdom in our trials: "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" (1:5).

James says three things: God 1) gives generously 2) he gives to all 3) He gives without finding fault. The phrase "God who gives" literally reads, "Let him ask the giving God..." James labels the Lord "the giving God." When God gives, he acts according to his nature or character. God gives "generously" – literally "simply." The simple gift is a pure gift. It does not return a favor nor does it expect a favor in return, a payback. God's gifts do not become debts. He delights in giving.

Second, the Lord gives to all. He does not play favorites. God is generous to all his children. Third, God gives "without finding fault" (New International Version (NIV)) or "without reproach" (English Standard Version (ESV)). It's possible to give and to add a reproach: "Yes, I can loan you more money, but what happened to the money I gave you last month?" Or, "Yes, I will help you get ready for your trip, but you should have started preparing two weeks ago." That is giving with reproach. God gives without adding a rebuke; he simply gives.

Asking in faith

Still, when we seek God's gifts, we must ask in faith, expecting to receive wisdom from him. James says that anyone who asks "must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

The doubter asks God for aid, but before he finishes his prayer, he thinks, "This will never work." James sees doubt as the opposite of faith – "He must believe and not doubt." The doubter is double-minded and unstable and he should expect to receive nothing. Doubters cannot assume God will give them anything.

Our culture often views doubt as a noble thing. The Psalms teach us to take their questions to God (Ps. 22, 73). And we must admit our doubts in order to seek the truth. But doubt is not intrinsically good. We must be willing to leave their questions behind and trust God.

Poverty and riches – a representative test revisited (1:9-11)

James says, "The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position [and the] rich should take pride in his low position." The "low position" of the rich believer is the same low position every Christian shares. We all bow to request mercy and forgiveness of our sin. The rich believer knows the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

The poor man is an heir of eternal life (cf. 2:5). He can learn to take proper pride in that. The rich believer, however, knows he must take no pride in his social position. He may "fade away," die, in the midst of the business that makes him prominent. He knows he is a sinner, saved by grace alone.

Conclusion 1:12

James' opening statement was a surprise: "Consider it pure joy my brothers, when you face trials" (1:2). But now James returns to the theme of trials: "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" (1:12).

We face short-term temptations and long-term tests. Some, such as illness, are obvious. Others, such as prosperity, are not. Yet God uses trials to reveal our flaws and to test our love for him. So then, during trial, let us not seek to escape, but to find maturity.

- When we plead for wisdom in a trial, trust God to provide.
- When a trial deprives us of worldly goods, may our affection never fade even if his external gifts disappear.
- When our possessions multiply, let us still love the Lord more than our goods.

We may look to Christ in two ways as we pursue this goal. First, Jesus faced trial after trial in this life. Satan tried him directly in the temptations. He had "no place to lay his head" (Matt 8:20), so he faced poverty. Later, he faced hatred, verbal abuse, and physical abuse. Finally, he endured the trial of crucifixion before God the Father raised him to life and to glory. Thus Jesus is most truly "the man who perseveres under trial" and receives "the crown of life" (1:12).

Second, if we fail to persevere in trials, the gospel remains. Indeed, when we take our failure to the Lord Jesus, confessing our sin, he will "give us birth through the word of truth" – that is, the gospel. He will redeem us "that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created" (1:18).

Many are strong in knowledge of the faith, but weak in the life of faith. James brings a corrective. The trials of life test our faith, pushing us to act, not just think. If we pass the tests of life, we see that our faith in Christ is genuine. Then, when God has confirmed our faith, he will grant us the crown of life eternal.