

JAMES

LIVING FAITH



Trials: What Good Are They? And What Do I Do When I'm in One?

James 1:1-11



Introduction

Why do bad things happen to good people? This question has been asked in one way or another countless times throughout human history. This “why” question is usually the first question we ask when we are faced with a trial. Why me? Why now? Why again? The Bible engages this question and many other questions related trials and suffering in a way completely unlike any other religion or belief system.

Joy. We spend our lives trying to get as much of it as possible. We find joy in our families, church, work, food, vacations, pets, books, movies, nature, sports and hundreds of other things. Hopefully we find ultimate joy in God Himself, even as we engage these other opportunities for joy. But here is one thing that wouldn't make many people's lists of joys – trials. Yet trials and joy are linked in the Bible, and we are called to consider them a joy. Why would we consider trials a joy? James tells us.



Study

Context: James 1:1-18 seems to jump all over the place. However, one main theme links everything together: the testing and refining effects of trials. How so? Well, first, this is the main point of vv.2-4. Second, these same themes reappear in vv.12-15 (compare “joy” to “blessed;” note the reappearance of the words “perseveres,” “trial,” and “test”). Third, the end of the letter discusses the same themes we see in 1:2-18. 1:2-4 is about perseverance in trials followed by a section on faithful prayer (1:5-8). The letter ends similarly with words on perseverance in trials (5:7-12) followed by a section on faithful prayer (5:13-18). So, James 1:2-18 seems to have one theme in mind with pastoral wisdom sprinkled throughout. James is a wise pastor. He realizes trials can produce doubts and confusion about God (vv.6, 13, 16-17). He helps us think through this in chapter one. Here is his wisdom on today's passage: as we wait for the full effect of trials' maturing work (vv.2-4), we ask God for the one thing we still lack: wisdom to face the trial in joy and faith (vv.5-8).

Structure:

- I. Greeting (1:1)
- II. Rejoice in the maturity trials produce (1:2-4)
- III. How to ask for wisdom in the midst of trials (1:5-8)
- IV. Wisdom for the rich and the poor (1:9-11)



Reflect

Rejoice in the maturity trials produce (1:2-4)

- 1.) Read 1:2-3. What should we consider a joy? And why should we consider it a joy?

Note: The Greek word translated “testing” (v.3) refers to the process or means of determining the genuineness of something. It could be translated “knowing that the proving of your faith” (ASV). Trials prove our faith when we endure them. When we cling to God in the mess of life, rather than turning from Him at the first sign of difficulty, it reveals our faith is genuine and in turn develops it.

APPLY → James is not telling us to put on a happy face when life is hard. This is not a command to fake it. Nor are we commanded to will ourselves into happiness. Take a look at the verbs again – “consider” and “know.” These are not emotional words at all; they are knowledge words. They are not suggesting we have to trick our minds into thinking everything that happens to us is good. Here’s the point: God is so good and powerful that He even brings about good things in horrible situations (in this case character formation). And in that we rejoice. *How does this help you to face the trials in your life? How does this help you to move closer to a joyful confidence in God in the midst of trials?* [See *Whole Bible Connections*]

- 2.) What outcome does perseverance produce? Why do you think this is so?

APPLY → We live in a microwave world. We want things quickly. Patience is not a virtue our culture embraces. It's a day of consumption and self-gratification. However, the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to develop endurance and perseverance to be mature disciples of Jesus. What has God taught you during periods of waiting in your life? How has God used times of testing to make you a more mature and resilient Christian?

How to ask for wisdom in the midst of trials (1:5-8)

3.) Read v.5. What are we called to ask for? What does this verse reveal about the character of God?

Note: The Bible's definition of "wisdom" is more robust than our usage. We limit the word to mere accumulation of knowledge or use it interchangeably with common sense. The Bible adds an important practical nuance to the word. Wisdom is knowing what God's Word says and then practically living it out (Prov. 1:7). So asking God for wisdom is like asking God for help in how to apply His Word to our practical situation.

APPLY → Life can seem out of control, overwhelming and confusing when we are in the middle of a trial. James 1:5 is wonderfully simple advice for us in trials: ask God for wisdom. Write out a few trials you are facing even if they seem small. How are you responding to them – problem solving, planning, scheming, non-stop worry? How can James 1:5 help you approach the trials you're facing?

4.) James 1:6-8 talks about doubt. Given the context, what particular doubt do you think he has in mind here? And what particular thing, given the context, should we "believe" (v.6)?

Note: The doubter in v.6 cannot expect to receive wisdom from God because he does not believe or live God's Word (see note under question 3). Hence v.8 where the doubter is called a "double-minded" person. This is similar to Jesus saying that "no one can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24). You cannot both believe God and doubt Him at the same time.

APPLY → So here is the big takeaway summary of these verses: Consider trials a joy by focusing on the maturity they produce and clinging to God's wisdom in faith. We might not get all our answers to the "why" questions. But we do get a very important answer to another important question: are my trials and sufferings useless and pointless? By God's grace, absolutely not. He uses them to bring us to a place of "lacking nothing" (v.4). In closing, write out some ways this passage has helped you think about trials in general and also the personal trials you have faced? And if you are in the middle of a trial, how do these verses encourage you?

Wisdom for the rich and the poor (1:9-11)

5.) The context makes clear James is talking about the rich and the poor in these verses. They are both called to "boast" or "take pride in" something. What are they? What is surprising about this?



Connect

Gospel Connections. We think of trials negatively. However, we cannot be mature and complete without them. The gospel itself helps us understand this. It is the good news about the redemptive results of suffering. In Jesus we see that we get no resurrection without a cross. We get no glory without suffering. There is no honor without enduring shame. Jesus, knowing this to be true and for the joy set before him, let perseverance have its full effect by enduring every second of the cross. He persevered through the trial of the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. And as the resurrected Lord He will one day put an end to trials and suffering for all those who turn from their sins and trust in Him alone.

Whole-Bible Connections. Trials exist because of sin. The world is broken because of God’s curse, which came as a judgment against human rebellion (Genesis 3). God also promised salvation in a person (Gen. 3:15). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13). Now God’s people wait for the New Heavens and the New Earth (Rev. 21) where there will be no more sin and, therefore, no more trials. In the meantime, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Notice that this verse does *not* say everything that happens to us is good. But rather that in all things God can produce good things for those who love Him. Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers, said this same thing when thinking about the evil done to him, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

Theological Connections. “*Perseverance of the saints* is the teaching that the work of God the Holy Spirit will never cease in the Christian, that all who are truly regenerated will never stop believing and trusting in Christ, that they will never lose their salvation, and that they will persevere to the end because God has promised to never leave them or forsake them (Hebrews 13:5). This doctrine does not mean that everyone who professes to be a Christian will persevere... In other words, there are people who appear to be saved, but who are not... Also, perseverance of the saints does not mean that those who are truly saved will not backslide or have strong doubts about their faith. It means that ultimately, they will remain in the faith because it is God who is keeping them and not themselves.” <https://carm.org/what-is-perseverance-of-the-saints>

Praise Connections.

WHEN TRIALS COME

“When trials come no longer fear
For in the pain our God draws near
To fire a faith worth more than gold
And there His faithfulness is told
And there His faithfulness is told

Within the night I know Your peace
The breath of God brings strength to me
And new each morning mercy flows
As treasures of the darkness grow
As treasures of the darkness grow

I turn to Wisdom not my own
For every battle You have known
My confidence will rest in You
Your love endures Your ways are good
Your love endures Your ways are good

When I am weary with the cost
I see the triumph of the cross
So in its shadow I shall run
Till He completes the work begun
Till He completes the work begun

One day all things will be made new
I’ll see the hope You called me to
And in your kingdom paved with gold
I’ll praise your faithfulness of old
I’ll praise your faithfulness of old”

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