

How to Respond to “Various Trials” – Part 1

James 1.2-4

Intro: I want to open today’s episode with a less formal, and more personal note. As I record this, the world is going through an unprecedented turmoil. Nations across the globe, including the United States of America, are suddenly in a condition the like of which has not been seen for more than 100 years. I am not an economist or a medical doctor; I hold not specialized degrees in sociology or government; therefore, I can offer little of value to the crisis as a whole. My special concern at this moment is for my brothers and sisters in Christ – some of whom are at this very time suffering from the dreadful Covid-19 virus and their loved ones, as well as others who are reeling from the sudden and cataclysmic social changes that have utterly uprooted our way of life and faced us with a challenge to our religious practice and expression which none of us were prepared to face. For this reason, I want to consider some semi-exegetical studies that I hope will be helpful to us in this difficult time.

The Epistle of James is part of a very special genre of Biblical literature which we might call “persecution literature” – we will talk more about the concept of persecution in a moment, but this letter (along with letters like 1 Peter and Hebrews) were written to Christians undergoing severe challenges to their faith. They are not merely instruction manuals on how to live the Christian life, but divine directions on how to continue living it when the world turns against you – in one way or another. The particular letter was one of the earliest – perhaps the *first* – of all New Testament books to be completed in its final form. It was written by the brother of Jesus, called James the Just or James the Elder because he served as one of the pastors of a congregation in Jerusalem. He knew about persecutions – he had seen his own congregation lose members to martyrdom, arrest, and flight. In fact, his greeting indicates that perhaps those to whom he wrote had once been a part of the flock he helped to shepherd. Now they were far away and may have had called out to him for his wisdom. The Spirit of God saw fit that his words to them would be included in the

library of New Testament scripture even for our benefit today. This means that James' words are not only inspired and inerrant – but they perfectly capture what God wants us to know about these matters in just the right way to sufficiently teach us the truth.

I. Various Trials

Throughout the course of his letter, James identifies some of the hardships his audience faced: they were being taken to court unfairly, evil spoken of in the community by powerful and influential people, defrauded of their wages by their employers – and it is possible that in some cases Christians had been killed. Some of these difficulties are hard for us to imagine – these are challenges to our faith we have never experienced, but surely the events of the last months have taught us that just because we have not seen it before does not mean it cannot happen. However, in this case, James informs us that what he says to these people in these circumstances has a much broader application.

James 1.2: “**My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into *various trials*...**”

The word trials can also be translated either “test” or “temptation” – but those two words have a drastically different sense of meaning. Later in James 1.13-15 we are going to learn that God never tempts us to do evil, but God often tests us to improve our character. “Temptation” is the work of the Devil; “Testing” is the work of God; But here James uses the generic and amoral: “**trial**” to simply mean “the difficult and challenging circumstances of life.” He speaks of “**various trials**” because he means to include *all* of them. The letter itself may be dealing with an issue of persecution – but James' words reach far beyond cases of persecution.

I think this is a good time to ask the question: what does it mean to be persecuted? This is important because there are some teachings in the Bible that have special and exclusive reference to how Christians should respond to persecution and they do not properly apply to every

other situation. Persecution is when a powerful force, usually an authority, sets itself against Christians because of our faith or the truths we affirm: such as when the Sadducees persecuted the apostles for preaching the resurrection. They opposed the resurrection because they denied it, and wherever belief in it grew their influence waned. The resurrection is, of course, a vital part of the gospel, so they opposed the Christian faith in such a way that would and could never be remedied. There was no way for the Christians to cooperate with their demands without compromising loyalty to Christ. The same was true when the Roman emperors persecuted Christians for refusing to worship them, or when some of the other Jewish leaders persecuted Christians for claiming that Jesus was the Messiah or that the Law of Moses was not binding on the Gentiles. Persecution is not simply being told to do something or not do something. When the doctor tells you that you need to stay home and rest, he is not persecuting you. When a police officer gives you a ticket for speeding – even if you were driving to church – he is not persecuting you. When we have not been targeted for our faith, whatever our trials may be called – they are not persecution (at least not the sort to which the teachings of the Bible about persecution in particular would apply).

However, James says that what he wants Christians to learn here applies just as well in trials of non-persecution as in trials of persecution. Anything from a flat tire to a terminal illness; from an economic depression to a global pandemic. And he further stresses this point when he says that these are situations we “**fall into.**” This is the same word to describe the man from the parable of the Good Samaritan who was walking down the road and “**fell among thieves**” – this means that we may not *deserve* the situation; it does not necessarily reflect God’s approval or disapproval of us; it “just happened” because we live in a world where bad and difficult and hard things “just happen.”

How does James tell us to respond: “**Count it all joy!**” This is an intense statement – even more so than I think that translation gets across. It means “consider it the fullest of joy or nothing but joy.” There

are dozens of parallels, quotations, echoes, and allusions in James' epistle to the Sermons on the Mount and Plain and this seems to be one. Jesus, when speaking about suffering persecution for righteousness sake said: **“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets”** (Luke 6.22-23).

The instruction to “count it all joy” is, in the words of Jesus, a command to rejoice with exceeding joy; to celebrate with dancing and cheering! But how can this be? That seems like an insane reaction to any difficult situation! And yet James commands us to react that way to every difficult situation! Of course, we who believe Jesus and James, His servant, know that what God says often sounds foolish to carnal ears – but to ears of faith the meaning may be discerned easily enough.

James is not commanded that we have some sort of sick, masochistic delight in pain – rather he is informing us that there are special blessings God will give us through our “various trials” so that after we have finished our moment of frustration and weeping we can praise God that even in the bad times He is good to us. How all of this works is both fascinating and thrilling, and I want to explore what James has to say about it for the next couple of weeks. To start, we want to consider the role of prayer in this divine process of turning trials into opportunities for blessing.

II. Deliverance, Endurance, and “The Perfect Work of Endurance”
What do we pray for when trials come? Most of us pray for deliverance – for the trial to just end and be gone!

There is nothing wrong with this prayer. Jesus asked God in the garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26.39: **“O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me...”** And Jesus not only prayed in this way for Himself, but for others, and taught His disciples to do the same

(Matthew 6.13). However, for Jesus, it was not an immature prayer – it was not a condition on serving God, demanding that He change His circumstances if the relationship was going to continue, because Jesus followed up with these remarkable words: “...**nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.**” If we ask God for deliverance, are we prepared to ask like Jesus did? And if God does not deliver us, what then?

Then perhaps we ask God for strength to endure. And this would not be wrong or wicked either. The Bible is full of cases when men and women in moments of great trial and stress prayed to God for strength – and in fact on this very occasion, while God did not “remove the cup,” He did send an angel to provide Jesus with strength for the task before Him (Luke 22.43). But when we read the words of James, he does not simply call on us to cry out to God: “Hold me fast! Let me stand in the hollow of thy hand! Keep me safe, ‘til the storm passes by!” That is a fine and acceptable and appropriate prayer, and I really believe James expects that we will be praying it in the background – but he says “**count it all joy**” because he wants us to know there is an even higher level!

Sometimes, when people talk about this sort of theme they speak in such vague and shadowy expressions that they make unbelievers of their audience by sending them on a quest for some secret meaning in every tragedy – that is not what James is saying at all. Listen to his explanation: “**knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.**” James says trials – especially those which touch our faith in God and Jesus Christ – give us the opportunity to practice patience, or more accurately – endurance. That is a blessing in itself, because through the endurance of trials, we may develop our spiritual character, become more like Jesus, and reach spiritual maturity – which is the idea in becoming “perfect and complete.” Trials provide a unique opportunity for God to purge out the dross of our bad attributes – of “all that remains of sin” from our old life (James 1.21) and to form Christ in us; and frankly without trials,

if it is possible for us to make this progress it will be much more difficult and much more grueling and fraught with failure and disappointment. Trials give an opportunity for the unique involvement of God.

III. Introspection and Prayer

However, *prayer* is a vital feature here. James says: “**If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him**” (James 1.5). When James mentions wisdom here he is giving an example of the sort of thing we can ask God to give us through the trial. You could substitute some other aspect of Christian character – self-control, gentleness, faith, love, joy, etc. – and the point would work just as well. James is challenging us to react counterintuitively when trials – difficult situations – come upon us.

Our normal response is to look for someone to blame, or to look for a way out, but James encourages us to look within ourselves, to be introspective – not because we are trying to figure out why this is happening – there is probably no deep meaningful reason other than the fact that we live in a broken and messed up world! James is saying look at yourself, see what you lack, and ask God to use the trial as a crucible to purge out your bad attributes and give you the good qualities that you need. This is a different way of praying than most people are used to – but it can turn any trial into an occasion for joy.

The mechanics of how God works out the impartation of this requested character development are left unrevealed – it is “somehow” according to His mighty power.

As William Cowper masterfully wrote: “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps on the deep and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill He treasures up his bright designs, and works His sov'reign will. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread are big

with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for his grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face. His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding ev'ry hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r. Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain; God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.”

IV. How to Pray

James says that for our prayer to be effective, we must “**ask in faith**” – this carries two meanings: first that we believe God is great: “**it will be given**”; second that God is good: “**who gives to all liberally and without reproach**” – God loves us and wants to bless us. If we keep this in mind then we can trust that even the most grim and dreadful situation can become a channel of blessing.

The second idea here regards the willingness of the man or woman to receive the blessing asked for: “**But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways**” (James 1.6-8).

Remember that we are asking God to make us more like Jesus. But that won't often make life easier – for a disciple is not above his teacher, and if the world hated Him it will hate us when we become like Him. Therefore, this request actually runs against the request to be delivered from the trial – it may result in *more* trials!

So, James says, do not be double-minded, two-souled – do not have half of your heart in this world and half of your heart in heaven – that man will not receive anything.

V. Praying Together

One final point: at the end of his epistle, James acknowledges that prayer often needs company. “**Is anyone among you suffering? Let**

him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. [To this point he speaks to individuals about how each one can face good and bad times and keep God at the forefront of his or her life, but then he shifts to a darker scene] **Is anyone among you sick** [The sickness here is not physical, but rather spiritual weakness brought upon by discouragement. In this case the trials of life are leading a man away from God and into sin]? **Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed”** (James 5.13-16).

The “anointing with oil” is most likely a metaphor for spiritual encouragement through prayer, spiritual counselling, and Bible study – we do not have the time to make a detailed case for this interpretation – that is for another study, what I want you to see is that when you are spiritually sick, social distancing is not a good thing.

You need your brethren, you need your elders (your shepherds, to anoint your head with oil and prepare you a table in the presence of your enemies and restore your soul). Please consider this. We are living in a strange time when, for the first time in many of our lives, our freedom and ability to assemble is being disturbed or removed – but as precious and integral to the Christian system as the assembly is, the church does not only consist in what we do in the assembly. There is love to be shown, strength to be shared, edification to be offered; there are prayers to be prayed, and songs to be sung in other settings also. Trials can become opportunities for blessing and great spiritual growth – occasions for joy – if we look inward, trust God, call for help when we are in need, and just ask.