

## How to Respond to “Various Trials” – Part 2

### James 3.1

Intro: In our last episode, we noticed the literary genre of James: persecution literature. This is a very special kind of literature written to Christians in distressing circumstances, generally directly related to their faith in Christ – attacks from powerful authorities, family members, influential people within the community – aimed at either ruining the Christian’s faith or utterly ruining his life.

In the case of James, we noted the author extends the application of his teachings beyond persecutions to “**various trials**” – an all-encompassing expression for adverse circumstances, some of which may have no connection to one’s faith and no real reason or rationale behind them at all; they are simply the sad realities of life in a broken world: a car accident, a financial downturn, a pandemic...

In our last study, we considered the meaning of James’ startling charge to “**rejoice with exceeding joy**” when these trials come into our lives! Although this seems at first an insane reaction, and to carnal ears it can probably be taken no other way, to one who believes that God is great and good, and who wishes to have God’s will accomplished in his or her life – conformity into the image of Jesus Christ – James explains the meaning in a truly thrilling way.

He challenges the Christian to be introspective when the trial begins. Instead of looking for someone to blame (because there may be no one) or for a way out (because there may not be one), James says: examine yourself and find what you lack in the way of Christian character. The example he gives is wisdom (perhaps as a summary of all Christian character, because he seems to see “wisdom from above” as something similar to Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit”) but his comments could apply just as well to self-control, gentleness, love, peace, joy...

When you find an aspect of Christian character you lack and have struggled to put on, or perhaps a “residual” sinful quality you have been unable to effectively put off, ask God in prayer to use the trial as a crucible to purge the bad from you and form the good in you.

Because of who God is and what God wills for your life, you may be confident that “**it will be given**” and when your endurance is complete, you will be that much closer to spiritual maturity.

This is the positive message of James; the thrilling, exuberant news that trials can become opportunities for spiritual training and channels for divine blessings that simply cannot be given easily in any other way. However, James also includes some warnings against reactions to which Christians are often tempted, but result in ruin and spiritual deadness.

#### I. What’s Wrong with Teachers?

One of the most unusual instructions in the letter is found in 3.1: “**My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.**” What does this have to do with enduring trials? Perhaps you think: nothing. And if so, you would be in good company.

Many bible readers and not a few scholars and commentators, treat the book of James as a New Testament version of the Book of Proverbs – a disjointed, collection of wise sayings that may be appropriately *peeled* out of the book, *plastered* on a situation, and understood *perfectly* as stand-alone truisms. Some treat each verse this way; some treat sections or chapters this way; but I suggest it is an altogether inappropriate way to read James.

I suggest that James is much more like the Epistle to the Romans than the Book of Proverbs in its continuity and logical sequence. In fact, the charge: “**let not many of you become teachers...**” has everything to do with the trials his audience was facing and speaks directly to those who fall into “**various trails**” even today.

The context will bear out that James is not simply of the opinion that there are enough teachers already, nor that teachers are bad and should be avoided, but that there were unqualified teachers who were doing more harm than good by the things they spoke – and some situations seem to generate an abundance of unqualified teachers.

## II. Be Careful What You Say About God

James' cautionary announcements against improper speech begin in chapter 1: **“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone”** (13). In fact, James goes on to explain that it is Satan who tempts by **“drawing us away”** into sin.

Attributing the work of Satan to God is the sign of an utterly depraved heart, but even if the words are spoken thoughtlessly and flippantly in a burst of emotion, they can have devastating, irreparable effects on a person's faith.

Thus, James concludes: **“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God”** (James 1.19-20).

This trio of instructions is directly tied to the previous discussion; based on the observations just made about the character of God and the true nature of temptation and sin, **“every man”** (regardless of what he is enduring) should be **“swift to hear”** – swift to hear what? The word of God (v.18) – the only source of absolutely appropriate and helpful commentary in the hour of trial; **“slow to speak”** – slow to speak what? Slow to speak speculative and emotional words about his situation – words which may result in irreverence and bitterness; **“slow to wrath”** – wrath against whom? In this context, wrath – a deep seated anger – against God Himself for the trials we are enduring, and perhaps for the mess we make of our own lives by reacting to them improperly.

**“The wrath of man”** leads us to speak brash, blasphemous, and erroneous words against God, which makes us even more susceptible to the Devil (Genesis 4.5-7); it can never produce what we really need and what God Himself is willing and able to give us through our trials – **“the righteousness of God”** or the right life and character that God wishes to form in us, making us right with Him.

### III. Be Careful of Easy Solutions

However, this discourse is not the end of James’ advise against too much talk in times of trial, the next section begins in 1.26-27, but is joined by a thread of context all the way to 3.1. Consider this very carefully.

James 1.26-27: **“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”**

In this passage, James introduces the expression **“to bridle the tongue,”** which he will use again in a form in James 3. Many commentators see a break in context between James 1.27 and 2.1 – but we think this is a severe blunder.

Notice the linguistic symmetry between 1.27 and 2.13-17: **“If anyone things he is religious...”/“If someone says he has faith...”** You will note then, that religion and faith are used synonymously.

**“If anyone things he is religious...”/“If someone says he has faith...” “but does not...” “that man’s religion is useless...”/ “faith by itself is dead...”**

The latter part of James 1 is introducing a phase of the discussion (vitaly connected to the general context of the proper response to trials) that proceeds entirely through the third chapter of James at least.

Follow very closely: here in 1.26-27, James makes “**not bridling the tongue**” somehow a negative counterpart to the proper expression of “**true religion before God**” – which parallels justification in chapter 2.

When a man does not “**bridle his tongue**” his religion is useless, because it prevents him from the expression of true religion: “**visiting the orphans and widows in their trouble ...**” Are you confused? How would failing to bridle, or control one’s speech cause a man to fail to “**visit orphans and widows**”?

We should note first that “**visit**” means much more than to carry on a conversation, but it refers to offering supportive relief and encompasses one’s whole duty to the unfortunate class. “**Orphans and widows**” constitute a merism – a figure of speech using extremes to represent a larger whole between them. In this case, it stands for all unfortunate people – including the poor. That’s very important.

This prepares us to find the connecting thread between these verses and 3.1.

In chapter 2, James addresses a problem in the congregations of his readers (evidently something that was reported to him): “**My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,’ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?**” (2.1-4).

If time permitted we would offer a much more thorough exegesis of these passages, but for now we can simply summarize the scene: two

visitors attend the assembly – one obviously rich, the other obviously poor.

In this particular time of persecution, it was the rich men of the community who were oppressing the Christians: taking them to court (2.6), speaking evil of them (2.7) and withholding their wages (5.4). So, James assumes that this rich man is not an honest seeker of the truth; perhaps he was invited by someone in the congregation in an effort to win him over and make him more favorable toward the Christians.

Then there is the poor man. James assumes that the poor man is there to meet Jesus and find the truth, for God has “**chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom**” (2.5). But the Christians are not thinking about the purposes of God at this time – they are thinking about their trials and how to bring them to a swift end.

So, someone in the assembly begins to speak! He calls, loudly and vocally in the presence of all, to the rich man, and “*says to Him*”: “**You sit here in a good place.**” He thinks through this extravagant flattery he will cause the persecution to cease and save himself and the whole church! Then in thoughtless pitilessness he turns to the lowly man who God loves, perhaps he was standing in the rich man’s way, and he derisively shouts: “**You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,**” James warns that at this time the teach may have one himself and his congregation the praise of the rich man, but he has lost the justification of God; he may have escaped the trial, but now he will be condemned by the courts of heaven.

Who is it who “**says**” these things in the assembly? Garreth Reese says it was “an usher” – but surely the better interpretation is to be informed by 3.1: it was the teacher. It was a man who boldly rushed into the pulpit because he had all the answers, all the easy solutions to the churches problems, but his answers were ill thought, if not altogether thoughtless, and he did more harm than good.

#### IV. Be Careful How You Judge

James' warning to the teacher is that he will receive a "**stricter judgment**" - The passage does not mean that God will ignore the wickedness of those who choose to 'live and let live' – rather it simply means that when a man points out truth to others, they expect him all the more to live by it and he removes even the pretense of justification on the basis of ignorance. In this case, the man who elevates himself becomes an easier target, so be cautious before you speak that what you have to say is really the wisdom of God.

The very specific incident addressed by James surely has a broader application in "**various trials**": it could refer to the man or woman who, like Job's friends, sets out to find the theological mystery or personal failings behind a friend's misery when, in point of fact, there is none! Such a person is, as Job said, "**a physician of no value, a miserable comforter...**" (Job 13.4; 16.2).

It could refer to the one who supposes that God expects him to analyze and critique how all those around him are handling their trials and so, as though oblivious to his own needs and responsibilities, he sets himself up as a judge against his brethren. This is the kind of person to whom Jesus says: "**Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye**" (Matthew 7.1-5).

It could refer to the self-righteous hypocrite, who seeks to justify himself by pointing out the flaws of others, but forgets that the God of

heaven will judge every deed and say to him: “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?” (Romans 2.21)

#### V. A Final Word: Shining or Incinerating?

Let’s return now to James 3.2-6: **“If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body [Here is the bridling language, picking up again from 1.26]. Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.”**

James says there is tremendous and dreadful power in our words for evil. We release them in haste, they seem so small in comparison to some of the horrendous *deeds* that we have refrained from *doing* – it’s just words... but **“the tongue is a fire”** – The blaze of evil ignited by the sins of the tongue can consume one’s entire life and even the life beyond this world.

Sometimes, trials cause thoughtless men and women to suppose that it is their time to shine, and eagerly they put themselves forward to speak, to teach, to solve – but instead of shining they simply incinerate.

And afterward, looking back on the smoldering remains of their friendships, their families, their congregations, their brotherhood, their lives... having nothing left but **“a stricter judgment”** – they can only reflect on James’ words: **“See how great a forest a little fire kindles...”**