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James 1:1-12

First Message

Andrew Drake

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# WHAT GOOD COMES FROM TRIALS?

*SERIES: A FAITH THAT WORKS*

I have very fond memories of summers as a youth. My two older brothers and I played every sport imaginable. Our neighborhood street and local park were the gathering places and proving grounds for all of us young boys. Long before I ever joined a community league team my oldest brother was my coach. He would drill me on the front lawn. We would practice the basic skills of basketball, football and baseball. If I got lucky, we'd even re-enact the spectacular baseball and football catches we saw on television.

Those days are still very fresh in my mind. So too is the phrase my oldest brother would shout at me when I felt too tired to keep practicing: "No pain, no gain!" I wanted desperately to be just as good as he was, so I would endure the pain, hoping to develop the skills and endurance I needed to succeed in sports. I never became a star athlete, yet "no pain, no gain" still echoes in my ears as I read through the scriptures and experience testing times in my personal journey of faith.

This morning we begin a two-week series on the first 18 verses of the book of James. This letter was written to people familiar with pain. Many of them had been forced to leave Jerusalem and establish new homes in Syria and northern Palestine. Most would be facing tough financial situations as well as social and religious dislocation.

This is an immensely pastoral and practical letter. A life of faith was not a theoretical exercise for James. Faith in Christ works in the real world. Faith makes a difference. If it is authentic, it must be demonstrated in both the heartaches and joys of life. James desires to encourage his brothers and sisters to remain steadfast in their devotion and faith in Christ no matter how difficult life got for them. From the very beginning of his letter he seeks to instruct and encourage them in their faith in the midst of trials.

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,**

**To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:**

**Greetings.**

**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.**

**The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.**

**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. (Jas 1:1-12 NIV)**

**Trials are a good time for remembering who (whose) you are**

James might have been tempted to give his letter greater weight by introducing himself as "James, a half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem Church." We learn, primarily from the writings of Luke and Paul, that James was a distinguished and celebrated pillar in the early Church. Yet his primary source of identity, purpose and influence came not from his blood-lines or his church rank, but simply because he was "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Several words are translated "servant" in the New Testament, terms like personal attendant, house servant, and even deacon or minister. The word James uses to describe himself is most often translated slave. Bob Roe, former elder and pastor at PBC, gives the heart of the term when he describes a slave as "one whose will is swallowed up in the will of another."

Our trials come into proper perspective when we see that our chief goal in life is not to gratify ourselves but to glorify our Master in heaven (Col 4:1). In spite of the philosophy of this world, our great calling is not to maximize our pleasure and minimize our pain, but to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33).

By referring to his readers as "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations," James reminds them that even though they are living outside the land of promise they are still the true people of God. Like the people of God before them, they must struggle to remain holy amidst the enticements and philosophies of their pagan environment.

During times of trials we would do well to recognize that as Christians our lives are not our own; we "have been bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:20). Understanding this truth is the first step to persevering in times of trial.

Trials are a good time for remembering who and whose you are.

Having established this, James opens with his first exhortation.

**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. (1:2)**

**Trials are a good time for rejoicing. They lead to maturity in the Lord.**

James immediately grabs his readers' attention by saying something that seems outrageous and contradictory. How in the world can they face their daily and difficult trials with joy?

#### **Trials are inevitable**

First, notice that James does not say "consider it pure joy *if* you face trials," but, "consider it pure joy *when* you face trials." Trials are an inevitable fact of life. Like the man traveling along the dangerous pass between Jerusalem and Jericho in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we can be mugged by adversity at any time.

Scripture makes it clear that we live in a world that is spoiled by sin. Our world is broken, fallen and imperfect. As a result we get hurt and frustrated, we become sick and die. Not only that, we have an adversary, Satan, whose sole desire is to assault the people of God that we might forsake our loving Savior Jesus Christ.

"Trial" refers to any adversity in life that threatens our faithfulness to Christ. James deliberately casts his net wide, saying that trials come to us in "various kinds." The word, which literally means "many colored," aptly expresses the truth that trials come in every color under the sun.

Trials you are facing right now might well include illness, grief, or financial uncertainty. Perhaps you are struggling with loneliness, a hard marriage or a painful divorce. Maybe you have a difficult child, a meaningless occupation. The end of a friendship, confining old age, the death of a loved one are all very difficult trials. Circumstances like these can rob us of joy if we believe that they are an indication of God's displeasure with us.

Last year, I was mugged with a personal trial as I faced severe hearing loss in my left ear. As my hearing continued to degenerate, I was convinced that the Lord was repaying me for the past and present sin in my life; that my life as an imposter had caught up with me; that if I was going to turn a deaf ear to his call for mature and righteous living as a pastor, husband and father, then he would make me deaf in actual fact.

As I struggled with these thoughts the Lord did an amazing thing. Each step along the way to recovery, from finding the right doctor to being able to pay for the surgery, he demonstrated that whether the operation was successful or not, my hearing difficulty was not retribution for my sin, but an opportunity for growth in my faith.

As my condition became known among this body, many of you contributed generously with your prayers and finances. My hearing is excellent right now. But more important than my physical healing was the transformation the Lord accomplished in my heart. Slowly but surely he turned my doubt to trust and my fear to joy. When trials come our way we must not be discouraged, thinking that it is a sign that God is angry with us. It can be a sign that he is at work in us to reveal his glory.

The apostle Paul was given a "thorn in the flesh" by the Lord to keep him from becoming conceited. Three times he prayed

that it might be removed. God's response to him was a lesson we can all learn from: "My grace is all you need, for my power is strongest when you are weak" (2 Cor 12:9). Listen to the words of the apostle Peter, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:12-13).

Unfortunately, many of us are surprised and consider it very strange when trying times come our way. Some Christians mistakenly think that as God's children we are immune from the trials of life, that we are somehow destined to float above them. We believe that if we just live right, saying the right prayers and attending the right church meetings, we will make or earn for ourselves a special path that avoids the uphill struggle and rocky terrain of life. James says that nothing could be further from the truth. Trials are not an elective in God's curriculum for life. They are a required course, and we can respond to them with joy if we have the proper perspective.

James is not suggesting that Christians live in denial, that we put on a happy face and say that things are fine when they are not. The call to joy is a call to respond honestly and authentically to trials, based on a perception of spiritual realities operating on a deeper level.

James explains that deeper reality in verses 3-4.

**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. (1:3-4)**

#### **Trials are valuable**

James says that the means by which our faith grows is by trials that test our faith. It is no secret that trials if properly handled lead to perseverance. James says "you know" this. Since the beginning of time, men and women of God have faced trials that have tested and matured their faith.

Perseverance means to hang in there, to not quit and give up hope. It has the idea of steadfastness and staying power. Perseverance is the spiritual trait of holding up under pressure and looking to God alone for relief. Trials are used by God not to destroy our faith, but to make it a faith that will stand the pressures of life.

In several places in scripture, suffering is called a refining fire that purges us of impurities like arrogance and pride, and develops within us a stronger and more genuine faith. The apostle Peter talks about this refining process: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:6-7).

"Tested" has the idea of being tested and approved. The word was written on the bottom of ancient clay vessels that had been formed, fired, inspected and found flawless. It was like the Good Housekeeping seal of approval.<sup>1</sup>

One of my daughter Olivia's crafts classes in middle school was to make a ceramic bowl. At the end of each day she'd tell us all about how the project was going. First, she formed a bowl from wet clay and let it dry; then she colored it with paint. At this stage she complained that it was still very fragile, and it looked ugly because the paint was dull. What she didn't know at the time of course was that the process was not finished. The strengthening and beautifying process came when she fired the bowl by putting it in an extremely hot oven for a time. When the oven had finished its work she was very proud to bring home a beautiful, useful and strong bowl.

Testing begins a process in which we are to persevere until it has completed its perfecting work. Like the refining fire that purges all the worthless and counterfeit dross in our life, the Lord will continue to use trials to test and refine us until righteousness is fully developed. It the process by which he molds us to his very character and draws us to himself.

In pre-marital counseling sessions I enjoy seeing a young couple's attraction to each other, their deeply-held belief that their partnership will last until death and their love will go on forever. But their love for each other and their faith in their marriage will be tested. I welcome that testing in their life. If it is handled properly it will deepen and mature their love for each other.

Which couple would you ask, newly marrieds or a couple who had been wed for 50 years for advice on matters of love? Which has the deeper, more abiding, more mature love? On their wedding day, newlyweds say, "I will love, honor and cherish you, in good times and bad, until death do us part." But that was at the beginning of their journey; their love had yet to be tested.

After decades of sharing the same bed and bathroom, raising children, financial and emotional highs and lows, times of uncertainty and doubt, and through a variety of physical ailments, a couple married for 50 years has a love that is a lot more true, full and complete. What they have is beautiful, deep and strong, and it comes after 50 years of trials and persevering in their love and devotion to one another.

We won't always do what is right and choose what is holy and good. When we fail in persevering through trials, and we will fail, we are not to give up hope. Fortunately, the perfecting work is not the responsibility of the clay, but of the Master potter. What we can do is humbly and continuously offer ourselves to the Lord to be shaped in his image, knowing that one day, as the bride of Christ, we will stand before him "having no spot or wrinkle" (Eph 5:27).

How can believers react to trials with so strange and unexpected a response as joy? Because we know who we are, we know whose we are, and we know that trials are an inevitable and valuable tool which the Lord uses to accomplish his good work in us. We are being formed into the image of his Son, being made perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Yet we often feel we lack something. Trials can hit us so hard and fast that we become dazed and confused, unsure how to respond and what to do next. If we find ourselves acting that way, James has good news for us.

**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)**

### **Trials are a good time for praying**

When we fall down or get lost in this tough terrain of trials and perseverance, our first response should not be to hide from the Lord but to go to him in prayer, seeking his wisdom. Not only will God respond, he will answer generously and without accusation. He does not desire to find fault with us. He does not embarrass us or shake his finger at us in disappointment. He picks us up off the ground, dusts us off, and generously gives us his wisdom to navigate the difficult path before us. The wisdom he gives us cannot be found in the self-help section of the bookstore. It can only come from God. It is a heavenly wisdom that forms our mind *and* our heart.

Here is how James describes this later in his letter, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (Jas 3:17). If we allow them, trials can make us bitter and mean-spirited. But if we seek after and yield to the wisdom and work of our heavenly Father, he will use the trials to create in us a more beautiful spirit than we ever thought possible.

This amazing wisdom is available to us merely by asking. But James says that in order to receive it we must be sincere in heart.

**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. (1:6-8)**

Honest questions of faith are part of our maturing process, but the doubters referred to here are "double-minded." The literal translation is "two-souled." It suggests an individual who has deeply divided loyalties. Such a divided heart has no fixed beliefs and no firm foundation for life. According to James, therefore, it is unstable, "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind." Such an unbelieving, uncommitted and insincere individual "should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord." The writer of Hebrews says something similar: "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6).

James' thoughts move naturally from the need to approach God with a consistent and unwavering faith to one of the chief threats to that kind of faith, and that is money.

**The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. (1:9-11)**

Material wealth was as much a potent source of trials and testing in the first century as it is today. The Bible never teaches that



wealth is wrong. Everything depends on how wealth has been acquired, how it is used and what place it holds in the heart of the one who possesses it (Matt 6:24). Many who are poor might say that they wouldn't mind swapping their problems with those of the rich, but the Bible is clear that prosperity is as severe a trial as scarcity. If anything, wealth is a more subtle and dangerous threat to a committed life with God (Mark 4:19; 1 Tim 6:9).

James encourages both rich and poor to see their life in light of eternal glory. Viewed this way, the brother in Christ who has humble circumstances takes pride in his superior position because the riches that he has are eternal; they can never be stolen or destroyed. The brother who is rich takes pride in his low position, because he knows that his life and his wealth can fade away as quickly as a flower withers under the scorching sun.

Many of us spend our life obsessing about earthly treasures. We either want what we don't have or we worry about holding onto what we do have. In the end, however, there is no eternal blessing in it because we leave it all behind. This is why material possessions are such a bad investment.

Our best investment is to persevere under trials and maintain our deep and abiding love for the Lord. As James says,

**Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (1:12)**

#### **Trials are a good time for remembering our eternal reward**

The victor's crown is a fitting image for the reward of abundant and eternal life that God bestows on those who love him and remain faithful to him over the often long and difficult race of life. We are tempted to evaluate our circumstances from a worldly perspective. The world says that true life and true worth comes from our pleasures and our possessions. But James says very bluntly that God doesn't see things that way, and neither should we. True satisfaction in life comes not from our physical resources that spoil over time, but from our spiritual resources from the Lord which will never fade. No matter how trying our circumstances it is always good to remember that we are rich with God's blessings of salvation, forgiveness, love, joy and peace.

Some of you don't feel rich with God's blessings right now. You feel discouraged, confused and overwhelmed. I hope that James' word this morning is helpful to you. When trials come we are not to run away and hide and enter into fear, anger and despair. We are to face our trials, knowing that we don't face them alone or in our own power. We have the wisdom of God that illuminates our hearts and minds and strengthens our spirit to see that trials are a cause for joy, because they are the testing ground where our faith and love for God matures.

There is no escape in this life from pain and problems. The good news of this letter is that we have help from our heavenly Father who loves us and desires that we lack for nothing. God can use for good the very thing that we think is bad, if we submit to his work in our life.

What trials are you facing right now? How are you responding to them?

We can respond in one of two ways. We can either view them as intrusions, incongruous with life as we expect it to be, and wallow in misery and self-pity; or we can view them as opportunities for growth, no matter how difficult they are. Viewed the first way, we respond to trials by ignoring or avoiding them, or seeking quick and easy resolutions. Viewed the other way, we respond by seeking the wisdom, strength and grace of God to persevere through them in confident hope that in the end we will become like him.

There is no minor irritation, no deep sorrow, no personal disaster that is outside God's sovereignty. Every event in our life can be used by him to develop wholeness and maturity. The benefits are hard won. The road is thorny, the progress is often slow and painful. We don't accept it easily or cheaply, but humbly. Sometimes it is only in eternity that we can make sense of it all. This is why it is so important for us to pray for one another and encourage one another to persevere in our faith.

Earlier this summer, a daily ritual for our family was watching the Tour de France on television. The world's best-known bicycle race winds through some of the tallest and steepest mountains of Europe. No wonder the race is considered the most grueling competition in all of sport. We were pulling for cancer-survivor Lance Armstrong to win. With every grimace and drop of sweat we felt his pain. When at the end he received his final yellow jersey, we rejoiced with him and his family.

There is no question that Lance knows intimately well the mantra "No pain, no gain." It was his motto through cancer treatments as well as the daily grind of the Tour, and it is reflected in the "Livestrong" bracelet he sponsors to raise funds for fighting cancer. I wear one of those bracelets, not to honor Lance, but to remind me of dear friends who are in the fight of their life against cancer. I'm wearing it because I don't want to trivialize the severity of trials that confront us in this life. I know that some trials are ultimately a death sentence. "No pain, no gain" can ring so hollow. A plan to follow is not enough, we need a person to trust. We need a Savior.

We can take refuge in knowing that trials, suffering and death do not have the final say. Jesus Christ has overcome death, and in him we have abundant and eternal life.

For those who love and trust in the Lord there will come an end to life's struggles. We are called to persevere in our trials because our pain and suffering will not go on and on. Not only can we find joy, peace and maturity right now, we can also look forward to the coming day when our every tear will be wiped away, when there will be no more sin, no more pain and no more death. For eternity we will be perfect, whole and complete, experiencing abundant life in the presence of God. What a reason to rejoice!

1. David Roper, *Growing Slowly Wise: Building a Faith that Works* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2000), 26.