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James 1:1-12
The Joy of Trials

Imagine that you find a magic genie's lamp and get three wishes - what will they be? My guess is: you would wish for the things that would make your life easier, for the difficulties in your life to go away. Maybe you would wish for millions of dollars. Maybe you wish to be young again, to regain the vigor of your youth. Or maybe, if you're a kid or teenager, you wish to be older, thinking that will get rid of the challenges you face now. Maybe your greatest burden and difficulty is a physical ailment, an incurable illness you bear, that you wish would go away. Maybe you wish to live forever. Maybe you wish for more knowledge, special talents or ability, to be powerful and famous, maybe even for superpowers.

What do all of these wishes have in common? They are all attempts to get rid of the *trials* and challenges in life, thinking that if we could just get rid of all the difficulties, *then* we would truly be happy. We instinctively think that the key to the good life is to have as little difficulties in it as possible, that if our trials would disappear, happiness would be ours. But the problem is, difficulties, trials, and temptations never go away - no matter how rich, powerful, famous, or successful you may become. You overcome one trial just to be faced with another. No matter who you are, your life will be filled with difficulties and trials, big and small. And this is true even for Christians; life doesn't become free of difficulties when you become a Christian; in fact, in some ways, it might become *more* difficult. So how are we supposed to respond to these trials as Christians? What does the Bible have to say about them?

Our passage today, *James 1:1-12*, gives us a very powerful, profound, and practical way to view and respond to trials as Christians. This is the first passage of the book of James, a letter written to "twelve tribes in the dispersion" (v.1) On the one hand, this refers to Israel, the Old Testament people of God - but he's not writing to just ethnic Jews, but to *Christians*. This makes sense, because most of his audience were Jewish Christians; but it also reminds us that the true people of God, true Israel, are *Christians* - and so this is a letter to *the church* scattered abroad - and that includes us, today. And the word "dispersion" also reminds us that we, as Christians, are scattered abroad, living as "strangers and exiles" in this world (1 Pet. 2:11). This world is not our home - it's full of dangers, trials, temptations, persecution, and suffering. The early church knew

this all too well. The book of Acts shows that the church first spread among Jewish Christians *fleeing persecution for their faith*.

So it is quite appropriate that James begins his letter with a very practical and pastoral passage on *trials* and how we, as Christians, should respond to them. He tells these early Christians - and all Christians, in all times and places, including us today - that we should not only expect trials, but should consider them a *joy!* This passage calls us to joyfully persevere in trials because 1. they are opportunities for spiritual growth; 2. because God promises to give us the wisdom we need to do so; 3. because our spiritual status is far more important than our earthly status; and 4. Because the end goal of eternal life is far worth all the trials and difficulties along the way. So let's begin by looking at the command James gives here...

I. Joyfully persevere in trials because they produce steadfastness and spiritual maturity (1:2-4)

James begins with an exhortation in v.2: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." In other words, he's saying: whenever, as often as, you face any kind of trial, of any kind, you are to *consider it* a joy, entirely, purely joy! Now that's a radical command, isn't it? So let's unpack it a bit.

For starters: what exactly does he mean by "trials of various kinds"? The word for "trials" here refers to an outward, external trial, difficulty, or process of testing. And the idea here is any external trial of any kind - whether big or small. So this covers all of the *big* trials and difficulties of our lives, such as: persecution that comes against for our faith, whether verbal, physical, or otherwise; it includes suffering, sorrow, and tragic life circumstances; sickness; financial difficulty; when you get laid off from work or lose your income; when the economy stalls out; a global pandemic and economic shut-down; political division and turmoil; unjust laws or court rulings; when others sin against us; war; even spiritual warfare; and every big life decision you'll ever face. All of these are "trials of various kinds." And if the *big* trials of our lives are included, well then certainly all the small, everyday, mundane trials are included as well, right? Like when the power goes out unexpectedly, or you find a leak under the kitchen sink right when you're about to walk out the door to go to work on a Wednesday morning; like getting stuck in traffic, having a flat tire; when mistakes are made; when plans are ruined; when you're disappointed and expectations aren't met; when you're not getting any sleep because of a sick or screaming child; having an over-demanding job; having troublesome employees or

coworkers; or any other normal everyday difficulties that arise in the course of trying to be a faithful Christian, husband or wife, loving mother or father, being obedient to your parents, being a good student or employee. Life is full of these “small” trials that are daily choices to either sin or to trust God and persevere in faithfulness.

And James says that *whenever* we encounter *any* such trials, we are to “consider it all joy!” In fact, the “all” there is an adjective, better translated “pure joy” or “entirely joy.” What does this mean? Well, first of all, he’s not commanding us to “always feel happy”, or stick a fake smile on our face at church and pretend like life is fine, as if the trials aren’t bad or difficult in the first place! No, of course not. There are plenty of trials where the appropriate response is to be sad and lament! But he *is* saying that, even in those moments, we are also supposed to have a sense of *joy* that remains the same. But this doesn’t mean we’re supposed to pretend like we’re happy or put on a smile all the time; this isn’t a command to change the way we *feel*, it’s a command to change the way we *think*.¹ We are to *consider* all these trials a joy. But how in the world do we do that? Why would trials - big or small - be considered a *joy*?

It’s because they are opportunities for our own *spiritual good and growth*. It’s not saying the trials themselves are good and joyful. But we *rejoice in how God is sovereignly at work in all of our trials*, both big and small! God is using them for our own spiritual good and sanctification. We see this in vv.3: “For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” These trials that come into our life - both big and small trials - are *the testing of our faith*; they test and prove our faith, revealing how strong and firm our faith is. Now, notice first that this *isn’t saying* that if we just have enough faith, then trials won’t come our way. IN fact, it’s saying the *opposite*: if we have faith in Christ, then we can be assured that trials *will come* our way as a means of the Lord *testing our faith*, revealing and proving it. Think about a factory setting, where they “stress test” a product to make sure it won’t break when under pressure but will continue to perform and function properly. If you have a waterproof tent and take it camping, and it doesn’t rain, it wouldn’t mean much to say, “My tent works great, it kept me dry all night!” The real test comes when the storm comes; if you go camping, and it rains, and you’re still dry, *then* you know how well your waterproof tent works. Trials have a similar function in our lives. When trials come, it forces the question: will we trust the Lord in the midst of it, continuing to

¹ Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell, *James*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p. 59.

walk in obedient faith? Or will give up, stop trusting the Lord, and respond sinfully instead? Trials test and prove our faith.

But that's not all. If trials *only* proved faith,, then this wouldn't be very encouraging for the moments where we fall short.. But this testing of our faith is intended to *strengthen* our faith. They don't just *prove* faith, they also *produce* a greater, stronger, more persevering, more mature faith. We can consider trials a joy because we "know" that this "produces steadfastness," spiritual endurance, a persevering faith! And that's something we all desperately need. True, genuine, saving faith perseveres to the end. Numerous scriptures tell us this; think, for example, of **Heb. 3:14**, "For we share in Christ, *if indeed* we hold our original confidence firm to the end." If someone puts their faith in Christ alone for salvation, they will be saved! But this necessarily means that *they will not fall away from faith*, because they will *continue to have faith in Christ* - not perfectly, but steadfastly. If someone professes faith in Christ, and appears to be a Christian, but then a trial comes into their life - perhaps intense sorrow and pain, or persecution for their faith, or they suffer injustice - and then they abandon the faith and fall away from Christ, never to return, then such a person is not a genuine believer. By contrast, a real Christian, a genuine believer, *will persevere to the end*; yes, as trials and temptations come, they will still and fall at times; but their faith will be proven genuine by the fact that they *keep getting up*, they keep running the race of faith! They may go slowly, they may limp along the way, but genuine believers *keep going and persevere to the end*. And the reason why is because *God is the one who holds us fast*; genuine faith *perseveres* because God *preserves and strengthens* our faith. And part of how he does that is through the trials He allows to come into our lives. With every trial that He brings us through, it increases our spiritual endurance, it makes our faith more steadfast!

Think of it this way: the Christian life is a marathon. I enjoy casually jogging, but I'm no marathon runner. If I were to show up for the NYC marathon this year, I would fail miserably. Why? Because I haven't built up the endurance needed to finish. I can run a mile no problem, 2 or 3 on a good day, but after that, I'm gassed. So I would need to train, to practice running longer and longer, a little bit more each time, so that my muscles and lungs get stronger, until I have the endurance needed to finish a whole marathon. Spiritual trials are the same way. They require spiritual muscles and endurance. How can we expect to weather the biggest and worst trials that come our way if we don't first learn to endure the smaller, lesser trials? So God sovereignly

allows these trials to come into our lives, promising that He will use them to strengthen our faith, to produce in us steadfastness and spiritual endurance, to strengthen our spiritual muscles, as part of the way that He will hold us fast. God strengthens our faith, through these trials, so that we learn to persevere in faith and cling to Christ - this leads to spiritual maturity and sanctification. This is why we're told in v.4 to "let steadfastness have it's full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." The idea of being "perfect and complete, lacking nothing" means being spiritually mature, having a strong, obedient, steadfast faith. In other words, God uses these trials to *sanctify us*; He strengthens our faith to be more obedient, more trusting. Now, we will not be completely *perfect* until our race is finished, and we see Christ face to face - on that day, our race will be complete and we will be perfectly sinless and righteous! But until that day, we keep running in that direction, running by faith, clinging to Christ. And He promises that He will hold us fast, and bringing us further and further along this road of sanctification. The Christian life isn't one of perfection - we all still sin - but it is one of continuing to walk in the same direction, of continuing to trust in Christ and grow in Him by His grace!

Therefore, we can consider all of our trials a joy by firmly believing that God is using them for our spiritual good, to strengthen and preserve our faith in order to bring us safely home to Him. When trial comes, whether big or small, let us stop, recognize how we might be tempted to respond wrongly, recognize that God has sovereignly brought this into our life for a reason (for our own good, to test us, to strengthen our faith and make us more mature in Christ), and let us decide to respond not by complaining, but instead rejoicing at the opportunity for spiritual growth and sanctification. Let us *persevere* when trials come by not turning to sin, but instead walking by faith in obedience to Christ. And thankfully, we don't do this on our own, but by the strength and wisdom of God. Which leads us to point two...

II. Joyfully persevere in trials by asking God for wisdom to do so through faith (1:5-8)

James has made it clear why we're called to consider trials a joy, persevering as God strengthens our faith into maturity. But still you might ask, "Ok, but *how* do I do that? How do I know how God wants me to respond to each trial - especially when those trials are particularly challenging and I'm not even sure what the right thing to do *is*?" James gives us (at least part of) the answer in v.5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him." First, let's recognize what this verse *is not* saying; it *isn't* a promise that God will give us anything we ask for. It promises God will abundantly give

us *wisdom*. Biblical *wisdom* here refers to being able to discern how God wants us to live and respond to specific situations, trials, and circumstances. This is faith and knowledge practically applied to real life. Sometimes, our trials are pretty cut and dry; we know exactly what the right thing to do is, even though it may not be easy. But often times, trials are so difficult precisely because we're not exactly sure how we're supposed to deal with them in a godly way. The trial of financial difficulty comes; you know the Lord wants you to work hard and provide for your family, but you also know that He wants you to trust Him to provide for you. So what do you do? Do you look for a different job? Do you reach out for help? Do you just wait until the Lord provides? There's no "one-size-fits-all" answer to a question like that; it depends on the circumstances; it requires *wisdom*.

If trials come, and we don't know exactly what God wants us to do or how exactly to persevere in faith through it, God tells us to *pray and ask Him to give us the wisdom we need* - and the amazing thing is, *God promises to generously give it, every time!* He even does so "without reproach." God's not going to mock you or get angry with you if you come and tell him that you don't know what He wants you to do and ask Him for help. No, of course not! God loves you! He loves to help you! He brought this trial into your life, in part, in order to teach you to depend upon Him and trust Him more! This is why James qualifies his statement in vv.6-8: "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive *anything* from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all His ways." God promises to give us the wisdom we need for trials *if we ask Him for it in faith*. Now, this does *not mean* that He'll only give us wisdom if we have *enough faith*. This doesn't say that God will only give us wisdom in proportion to how much faith we have. The contrast between "faith" and "doubting" here is the difference between a genuine believer and an unbeliever. The one who doubts here is the person who doubts in the goodness and character of God; this person doubts that God will fulfill His promises, skeptical that God's promise of salvation will really pan out. Just like the sea is unstable, being calm one day, and having 7 foot waves the next, so is the fair-weather Christian who claims to trust God one day, but when trials come, doubts, turns away from God, and instead trusts in the wisdom of the world. One commentator put it this way: The "double-minded" one who doubts refers to the "people who are unwilling to let go of the world and truly follow Christ, torn between sin and obedience, reluctant to let go of the pleasures of the

world for the sake of discipleship. This description hits close to home in an age of nominal Christians who attend church from time to time, perhaps even regularly, but who refuse to let God interfere with their daily lives and goals.”²

This means we can't use complexity or ignorance or uncertainty as an excuse for not trying to obey God in our trials. We can't say, "Well, the Bible says I should do *this*, but that's just not going to work in my circumstances, so I'm just not even going to try." If trials come and we grow bitter and angry with God instead of trusting Him with it, then we can't expect to get anything from God, because it means we're not coming to Him in genuine faith. But if you're desire *is* to persevere in faith, even if you feel like your faith is weak, God promises to help you, to give you the wisdom you need to do so, if you ask and rely on Him! If your desire is to joyfully persevere in faith through a trial, but you're just not sure how, then go to God and ask Him to give you wisdom to do so! He promises He will! So maybe you're going through a trial right now, but you're just not sure what to do. Go to God in prayer. Ask Him to hold you fast and strengthen your faith through this. Ask Him for wisdom to do what He wants you to, to joyfully persevere. Trust He will give it, since He's promised to do so. And then, *just take the next step in faith*. He doesn't say He's going to make everything plain and clear all at once, but if you walk forward in faith, you can trust that God will make your path clear as you go.

But what does this look like in practical, concrete terms? Thankfully, James gives us an example, leading to our next point...

III. Joyfully persevere in trials by focusing on your spiritual status, not earthly status (1:9-11)

As we think about the trials we face in life, some of the most common and obvious deal with our finances. So it makes perfect sense, then, that James now turns and applies this principle of joyfully persevering in trials to the real life, practical examples of poverty and riches. He deals with each in turn, showing that we deal with these trials by focusing on what really matters: our spiritual status, not our earthly status.

He speaks first to the trial of poverty, in v.9, saying: "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation." "Brother" here refers to a Christian, a fellow believer. The word for "lowly" means "poor," referring to both his low social and economic status, and his financial and material poverty: this is a poor Christian, suffering the trials of not having enough money, struggling to

² Blmoberg and Kimmell, *James*, p.54.

make ends meet. Many of us can identify with this, lacking finances to some degree, whether for a season or long-term. So how do you consider such a financial trial a joy? How do you respond in persevering faith? James says the “lowly,” poor Christian should “boast in his exaltation” - that is, in his *spiritual exaltation in Christ*. I think James is drawing on the same idea we find in **Jer. 9:23-24**: “Thus says the LORD: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.’” We are to boast not in our earthly status, resources, or circumstances, but in our *spiritual* status. And as Eph. 1 tells us, if we are in Christ through faith, then we have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing, receiving the “riches of His glorious grace, which He has lavished upon us,” receiving the “riches of His glorious inheritance”! Yes, financial trials matter; we have physical needs, our families have needs, money really is a physical necessity. But the perspective of gospel faith reminds us that our physical needs pale in comparison to our spiritual needs; our greatest, most pressing need is to be redeemed and forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God, and this greatest need has already been met for us in Christ Jesus, who died for our sins on the cross and rose again! We are rich in Christ, redeemed and declared righteous, given the inheritance of eternal life as God’s children - all by His grace! If that’s true, then we can certainly trust him with our financial needs, can’t we? We can consider it a joy because God is reminding us through our financial hardships that even if we’re lowly and poor in an earthly sense, we are exalted and riched beyond comparison in Christ Jesus! Trust that God is using your poverty to strengthen your faith and sanctify you, so that you will be exalted and glorified in Christ on the final day. Put your finances into eternal perspective.

And the same is true for the trial of being rich. And yes, you heard me right: the second *trial* James addresses here is the trial of being rich. Now we might be tempted to scoff at that and think, “yeah, sure, I feel so bad for Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, they’re really suffering!” We might think that as trials go, being rich wouldn’t make the list - but James says: not so fast. Being rich is also a trial because it makes it more and more difficult to trust in God instead of trusting in worldly things - like wealth and riches. Just remember Jesus’s words in Matt. 19:24: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Riches can easily become an idol. The more wealth and worldly comforts we

have, the more we may be tempted to trust in riches and worldly things rather than God. So how can we joyfully persevere in this trial? Vv.10-11 give us the answer: the “rich” Christian is to boast “in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.” The rich man shouldn’t boast or rejoice or put his hope in his riches and earthly prosperity, because it’s not going to last; one day, we’ll all die, and we can’t take any of our riches with us into eternity; we can’t buy our way into heaven. Therefore, the rich man is to boast in his “humiliation” - that is, to remember that he is just as sinful and spiritually needy, just as dependent upon God, as the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low. If you’re a rich person, persevere in faith by boasting in the humility that the gospel brings; remember that your earthly riches don’t matter, but all that matters, ultimately, is you’re standing before God. Remember that you are just as sinful and needy, just as dependent upon God as the poorest of the poor, and lowliest of the low.

And the church is uniquely helpful in doing this. When we gather as a church family, it reminds us that our spiritual status is not dependent on our earthly status whatsoever. We all have an equal inheritance in Christ, purely by grace through faith, not works or riches. We’re reminded of this as the rich and poor rub shoulders together, worship and fellowship together, even serve and bless one another, in the local church congregation! Church is one of the rare places where rich and powerful man might be dependent upon a poorer man who’s lower in the eyes of the world; just think, for example, of a poor janitor who’s a faithful Christian husband and father, serving as an example to a rich businessman to care more about his family than his career. Or think of a rich, highly educated doctor being taught the scriptures by someone poorer than him. This is counter-cultural, isn’t it? This is why the church is so helpful in both humbling the rich, and exalting the poor, as we’re forced to live out our common faith in Christ side-by-side. We’re able to remind each other of what truly matters. So whatever our economic trials may be, whether riches or poverty, we can joyfully persevere in faith by remembering that our earthly status is only temporary and fleeting, but the most important thing is our spiritual status, our standing before God. Which brings us to our final point...

IV. Joyfully persevere in trials because the end goal of eternal life is worth it (1:12)

V.12 brings James' argument full circle: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to

those who love him.” Yes, the Christian life will be filled with trials, big and small; yes, some of them will be very difficult and hard to navigate; no, persevering in the faith is not easy when trials of suffering, persecution, and temptations come our way. But we *must* persevere and hold steadfast to the faith, no matter what it costs. Why? *Because the end goal is worth it.* The road we walk may be difficult and dangerous, but the destination is *eternal life with God!* Keep running the race, because the reward is worth it - the crown of life! That’s worth rejoicing in! That’s worth persevering for! And this is promised to all who remain steadfast under trial. But that *doesn’t* mean we earn eternal life by being good enough, or persevering enough. No, eternal life is “promised to those who love him” - who love God, who loved us so much that he sent His son, Jesus Christ, to live the perfect life for us, persevering to the end, remaining steadfast under every trial, that in His death and resurrection He could secure redemption and eternal life for *all* who repent and place their faith in Him alone - for all who *love Jesus*. It’s not about running the race or living the Christian life perfectly, or even better than anyone else. It’s about keeping your feet moving forward, about getting up every time you fall, by continuing to hold fast to Christ through faith in His gospel of grace! So whatever trials you’re facing, whatever may come our way, this week or throughout your life, let us count them all joy, brothers and sisters. Let us persevere in the faith, asking God for wisdom to do so, trusting that He is using these trials to strengthen our faith and sanctify us, even to hold us fast and bring us home to Him! And if your heart begins to fail, if you feel yourself tempted to doubt or give in, just look to the end goal of our road and remember: *eternal life is worth whatever trials and obstacles you might face along the way!* Let us endure for the joy set before us.

If you’re not a believer this morning, this promise of eternal life can be yours, too! Simply turn away from trusting in this world and turn to trust in Christ alone; love Him because of His love for you. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you.

Let us pray.