

1 Faith that conquers
James 1:2-8

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Rejoice in your trials (verses 2-4)

Trials are things which put us to the test. By testing us, they bring out what is in us, for better or for worse. Pressure reveals the person. Trials may be difficulties which come from outside, such as the persecution James' own readers were probably facing, or they may come from our own inner struggles. The trials referred to in verses 2-4 are the first kind, whereas the trials (or "temptations", but the word is the same) of verses 13-15 are the second. Both kinds of trials occur when negative occurrences encounter our weak and imperfect human nature. Where do trials come from? According to James, they are not directly from God, who is the author only of good and perfect gifts (verses 13-17). Trials are unfortunate and painful circumstances born out of a fallen world populated by fallen people and inhabited by a power of darkness using that fallenness to kill and destroy. Yet God has always has a plan to bring good out of evil and to use everything in a positive, redemptive manner, for His ways are always constructive and never destructive, even if we need to have the false supports of this world painfully removed in order to have the true support of Christ replace them. But to see this happen, we must cooperate with Him in His plan, and this is what this teaching of James is all about.

We will encounter trials (verse 2), James tells us; that much is a certainty. The meaning of the word "encounter" is to fall into the midst of something; the same word is used of the man on the road to Jericho falling into the hands of robbers (Luke 10:30). When trials come, we often feel, like the man in the parable, that we have fallen into the midst of something out of our control, often something we never even saw coming. When we do fall into these trials, James tells us, we are to count it all, pure or complete joy. And this total attitude of joy is not to be limited to certain lesser trials, but to all trials, literally "trials of many kinds". This joy, however, is not to be equated with our idea of pleasure. Why would we take pleasure in trials, or find them enjoyable? Joy in the Biblical sense is not simply an emotion. It is an attitude we take in our spirit, a determination, an expression of the will, that what appears to be and is undoubtedly hard is destined, by the grace of a sovereign and loving God, to bring about something good which would never otherwise have occurred. The emotion of joy is real, but it follows after (perhaps long after) the decision of the will. Two people facing the same negative circumstances could have completely opposite reactions. The believer is meant to see the hand of God at work, whereas the unbeliever sees only trouble. When we choose to submit ourselves to God and trust Him, we will find Him at work in our hearts and circumstances, and as we see His plan unfolding, the emotional dimension of joy will come. The problem with our culture is that we are programmed for pleasure – that is, pleasure as an emotion or feeling. It is completely contrary to the mindset of our culture to see a trial as something positive. All we see or feel are negative and painful emotions. The consequence of this is not redemption, but often a fall into bitterness against people, circumstances or God Himself, a bitterness which is based on our inability to understand what is happening to us. And that is why James will go on shortly to stress how critical it is when we face trials that we ask God for wisdom – which is another way of saying His perspective on our situation. Those who seek pleasure will ultimately be

disappointed, but those determined to find God in the midst of difficulty will certainly in the end discover real joy.

In verse 3, James tells us why we should rejoice in our trials. The testing of our faith which is brought about by suffering trials produces endurance or perseverance. Testing answers the question as to whether our faith will persevere. If our faith is genuine, it will flourish and strengthen in trial. If not, it will quickly wither away. The word “endurance” goes far beyond the idea of a patient or passive ability just to keep our head above water. It refers to a dogged tenacity, a strength and courage which rises up and causes us to stand. It is a quality, one scholar says, which allows us to stand on our feet and face the storm. It is what inspires soldiers on the field of battle. It is what caused Lord Nelson, as he saw the apparently overwhelming fleet of French ships approaching at the battle of Trafalgar, to raise his telescope to his blind eye and declare that he saw nothing he could not conquer. That faith is available to you and to me, whether we face a personal Trafalgar or just the latest annoyances of life. Many an ordinary man, when placed on the field of battle, becomes a hero. Trials are the tools by which God makes heroes out of ordinary believers. And that alone is a reason for us to find joy in the hardship.

This endurance, however, James continues, must finish its work (verse 4). It must not falter or give up in its quest, which is to reach the goal of maturity. When the winds of trial have blown over us and shaken loose from us everything not rooted and grounded in God, what is left is tested, true and genuine character. Jesus was saying exactly the same thing in His parable of the two houses (Matt. 7:24-27). The one built on sand and the one built on rock experienced exactly the same shaking, but when the trial was over, only one house remained standing, its foundations exposed as genuine and unshakeable. And now that our foundations are stronger, we are so much better equipped to deal with the next set of trials that come along. As time goes on, things that once would have shaken us badly begin to have lesser impact, and things that used to bother us a little we scarcely notice. Why? God has used our trials to remove the false foundations that once we relied upon, and replaced them with new and much stronger supports. Not only that, we can use our experiences to turn around and help others going through the same kind of things, encouraging both us and them. Our faith increases as we understand God’s ability to keep us in trials is far greater than we ever imagined.

Ask in faith, and God will help you (verses 5-8)

As the believer faces the trials in front of him, James has advice to offer: if you lack wisdom, then ask God (verse 5). This asking must be a lifestyle, as the Greek present tense indicates, speaking of a continuous activity or process. The construction of the sentence in Greek assumes that the believer does lack wisdom, and it’s comforting to know all of us are in the same boat. The fact that, as we face trials, we lack wisdom, does not bother God or cause Him to reject us, for James says He will give it to us without reproaching us for the request. Our request actually causes Him to reach out to us. It is what we do when we realize our lack that is the issue. The worst situation we could be in is to believe that we have wisdom when we are actually ignorant. Wisdom is not philosophical knowledge, but is the ability to see things from God’s perspective. Wisdom is what we find in places like Proverbs, or any other book of the Bible for that matter, where God’s perspective is applied to the situations of everyday life. Wisdom is knowing the

nature and purpose of the trials facing us, how to respond to them and what God wants to do in us through them to bring us forward into a much greater place where we will actually look back and, in one sense, say that we were glad we went through them. That is wisdom! The good news is that in order to get wisdom from God, all we have to do is to ask. He delights to give it. And He gives it “generously and without reproach”. Far from being offended that we are having a hard time facing trouble, God understands what we are going through. He desires to reach out to us in grace and give us all the wisdom and strength we need in abundance, and without even thinking of rebuking us for the mess we are in. And that does represent His grace, because often the trials we face are either (directly or indirectly) a result of mistakes we have made or wrong attitudes we have had.

But James wants to be more specific in what he says. So he continues: we are to ask God, but the way in which we ask is critical. We must ask in faith without doubting (verse 6). To ask in faith means to ask in confidence, in an assurance that God is in control and is working out His plan. It does not mean that we present a wish list to God, but that we submit our lives and the trials through which we are passing to Him in the confidence that He has a purpose, perhaps invisible to us, that He is working out. It is the prayer of faith Jesus prayed at the hour of His greatest trial, “*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will*” (Matt. 26:39). This kind of prayer must exclude doubt, for the force of the expression used here in Greek is that we must not doubt at all. The word “doubting” describes someone divided in his mind and wavering between two opinions. He who doubts, James adds, is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. James is probably thinking of the Sea of Galilee, known as the sea of waves, when he describes such an individual as like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. Like a wave, he may be up one day and down the next. Such a person cannot make up his mind whether to believe God or not. James does not mean that the only prayer God will hear is one from which every trace of human doubt is excluded. He is not talking about our psychological or emotional state, or a thinking process within our minds. He is talking about the state of our spirit. Our spirit within us cries out to God, “Abba, Father”, even as Jesus did at Gethsemane, choosing to believe that He is good and has not abandoned us, even when our emotions and our minds are screaming the opposite. If the doubt James is talking about were emotional or psychological, God would never hear any of our prayers. No, he speaks of something deeper, of spiritual doubt and of spiritual assurance, and this is a different matter entirely. Do we pray by the declaration of our spirit and our will that Jesus Christ is Lord and with the desire to submit ourselves to His purposes unconditionally? Or do we pray with the idea that our continued faithfulness to God is dependent on how He chooses to answer our prayers? That is what it means to doubt spiritually. The spiritual assurance of faith enables us to jump off the cliff, knowing that if that is what God requires us to do, somehow, against all our rationality and emotions, He will catch us, even if we have no idea how He is going to do it. The prayer of faith, when all is said and done, is the prayer of trust – personal trust in the Lord, in His goodness and in His ability to help us.

This thought is reinforced in verse 8, where the doubter is described as a “*double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*”. This kind of man will receive nothing from God. The word “double-minded” is literally “double-souled”. The rot in this man’s life goes deep into the soul. One part of his inner being believes, while the other part does not. His instability, by the way, will be apparent not only when he prays, but in other areas of his life. One day he may honour God in

his business dealings, the next day he may cheat someone. One day he may act kindly toward someone, the next he may slander them. One day he may be a faithful church member, the next day he may leave. You can never count on him. Such people are frequently religious and self-righteous, but their following of God comes to an end when what God does no longer suits them. A perfect illustration of this is found in Isaiah 58, where the prophet describes those who seek him day by day and ask Him for just decisions, who fast and pray, but who then complain God has not heard them (verses 2-3). These folk are revealed by the prophet as double-minded, for on the very day they fast, they mistreat their workers and stir up contention and strife (verses 3-4). When they come to realize that fasting must be followed up by righteous actions and start to do them, their prayers will begin to be answered (verses 5-12). Unlike the double-minded man, the true believer comes to God with the prayer of faith, the prayer that asserts that no matter how God chooses to answer the prayer, he will continue to follow Him and to trust that his life is in God's hands. His prayers will be single-mindedly accompanied by obedience to the commands of the God to whom He is praying. But the double-minded person does not ask in faith. He comes to God with an attitude of conditional obedience: "Here is my prayer; if you answer it, I will follow you; if not, I won't." He tests God to see whether God will jump to attention when he calls. He is not interested in submitting to God's commands but in using God to get what he wants. And that, James tells us, never works.

This theme of asking in faith is picked up again in James 5:16. The prayer of faith does not have to be prayed by spiritual titans whose lives are in perfect order, but is available to all of us who simply want to seek the Lord's will in our lives. Even Elijah, James tells us, was a man like us, and yet look what his prayers accomplished (5:17). And Elijah had his valleys just as much as his mountaintops. For an example of the prayer of faith that all of us can identify with, consider the distraught father who came to Jesus on behalf of his demonized son, crying out, "*I do believe; help my unbelief*" (Mark 9:24). The father had enormous doubts in his mind and emotions, yet he was not double-minded. How do we know that? Because he received a miracle, but here James states categorically that the double-minded man will receive nothing from God. That man did not come looking in both directions, as if to say, "I'll follow you, Jesus, if you heal my son, but I won't if you don't." He came to Jesus, throwing himself on His mercy, knowing Jesus was his only hope, and somehow trusting that Jesus would meet his need. He wanted to believe – in fact, he did believe, yet he honestly acknowledged the inadequacy of his faith, but still came to Jesus for his answer. In spite of his weakness and the apparent impossibility of his situation, he had *set his heart to believe*, even if his mind told him the opposite. Notice how many times people came to Jesus in simple trust that He would help them. Notice the critical role of their faith, as when Jesus told the woman with the bleeding that her faith had made her well (Luke 8:48). Their faith released the power of God to do amazing miracles through Jesus' ministry. Jesus could have done it Himself, but He chose to limit Himself by allowing for us to release the power of God through our prayer of faith.

The prayer of faith

The prayer of faith is a reckless prayer, prayed by reckless people. It is not for the faint-hearted. But it is a prayer that can be prayed by all of us who waver in our emotions, our feelings or our thoughts – if we are prepared to allow the deep peace birthed in our spirits by the Holy Spirit to overrule the confusion of our minds and jump off that cliff into the arms of God. Why is it that

trials are connected by James with the prayer of faith? Our human rationality tells us that we would be most likely to take a bold step when things in our lives are otherwise going well and we feel strong. Yet such is not the case. The fact is it takes the appearance of trials to force us out of our own sufficiency, the place where we feel confident in our own ability to deal with things, and out into that place where God alone can help. Faith deals with the impossible, what we cannot do. It deals with what happens when we come to the end of our strength and to the beginning of His – and the two cannot exist together. And that is one of the reasons we should thank God for trials. It shouldn't take them to make us people of radical faith, but it usually does. Yet we can profit from our experience. We can become people who, having learned this lesson, are prepared, whenever the Father calls us, to take that leap into the unknown.

This is far more important than we often realize for the advancement of the kingdom of God. Why? Because people operating in their own strength, no matter how accomplished and gifted they are, can never do much for God. The power of God to advance His kingdom is released in people like the desperate father or the woman with the bleeding, people who saw their trial, their crisis, as an opportunity to cast themselves on God and believe Him for something they could never do themselves. They came to Jesus in their desperation, and their prayer of faith released the power of the Holy Spirit within Him to do the impossible. Jesus could have done it by Himself, but God designed it so that it is our faith, weak and stumbling though it may be from our perspective, that is the critical ingredient in releasing the infinite power of God dwelling within His Son. The kingdom of God is not about attaining what is possible. Anyone can do that. It is about performing what is impossible. And that only God can do. But He does it through us, and He does it through the prayer of faith. That prayer is somewhere in your heart. Reach inside and ask God to release it within you by His Spirit. Dream of doing the impossible. Ask God to set you free from the prison of the possible into the freedom of the impossible. That is the place where you come to the end of your resources and to the beginning of His. That is the place where human ability ends and divine power begins. It starts in the prayer of faith. It ends in the glory of God.

Lord, help us to see that glory come.