

Joy of Trials

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[0 : 00] John chapter 15 on page 1083 of our Bibles. So from John chapter 13 into chapter 17, we have a teaching of Jesus to his disciples the night of his arrest, the night before his death on the cross.

And here in John chapter 15 and verse 18, through to chapter 16, Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for what they will face for his sake.

So John 15 at verse 18. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own.

As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you.

No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

[1 : 15] They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin.

He who hates me hates my father as well. If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my father.

But this is to fulfill what is written in their law. They hated me without reason. When the counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the father, the spirit of truth who goes out from the father, he will testify about me.

And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. All this I have told you, so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue.

In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he's offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes, you will remember that I warned you.

[2 : 20] I did not tell you this at first because I was with you. And then at the end of chapter 16, just at verse 33, as he concludes, he says, I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace.

In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world. And then in the letter of James, as we begin to look at the letter of James this evening, James chapter 1 on page 1213. And we will read the first eight verses together. So James chapter 1, first eight verses on page 1213. 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.

[3 : 49] 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. Let's think together about what James says regarding joy in trials.

I don't know if any of you are like me, where sort of post-Christmas, eating a lot of food, typically not very healthy food, you have new resolve for good diet and good exercise.

Well, I came up with my post-Christmas, and I suspect it's becoming annual running resolve at least three times a week, which lasted about three days of that week, because then the wind and the rain came, and I discovered I am definitely a fair-weather runner.

You'll hear lots of people saying, in terms of exercise and going to the gym, no pain, no gain. That's received wisdom, only if you receive it.

[4 : 56] You come to the book of James, and we've got New Testament wisdom. James, the half-brother of Jesus, who describes himself interestingly, not in terms of his biological relation to Jesus, but in terms of his spiritual relation.

He is servant of God and servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's writing to the Jewish Christians, picture of the 12 tribes there in verse 1, scattered by persecution, and he is writing what's regarded as New Testament wisdom.

But we might again say, really? James, is what you're about to say, really, wisdom? Joy in trials? You can easily sound like an oxymoron, can't it?

Two things that just don't belong together. How do joy in trials fit together? Rather, we perhaps more typically, when it comes to trials and suffering, think in terms of fear.

We recognize the hurt that might come, the cost that might be involved to us on any number of levels. So trials are something we typically look to avoid.

[6 : 07] There is fear as a response. Or another response is perhaps to fixate on our suffering so that's all we can see, so that our very identity is bound up with the trial that we are going through.

It's hard to see a way out. It's hard to look up. We find ourselves consumed by it. Sometimes our attitude towards trials is to forget.

Forget, perhaps, that we've been there before and we learned important lessons in relation to Christian experience. So we come to a new trial and again, we're asking lots of why questions and what questions and we can't see that there can be any useful purpose to serve in our suffering.

So we might ask James, really, is joy in trials wisdom? James gives us another response, a fourth F, and it's the F of faith.

There can be joy in trials when we have Christian faith and when we learn to look at them in the right way. So that's why I hope this evening we'll be able to begin to consider together how can we look at trials in such a way that it's possible for us to have joy because we understand what God wants to do.

[7 : 32] So three questions. Our first question is the most basic one, I suppose. How can I have joy in trials? Let me begin with a statement and then we'll begin to see how James unpacks it.

I'm going to feel like I'm talking about myself in the third person for this whole series. I can tell already. As a Christian, I can see through the trials that God sends to God's purpose and that purpose is mature faith and Christ-likeness.

Let's look at verses two to four together. Begins, consider it pure joy, my brothers. We can have joy in trials if we experience them in the first place as Christians.

That's the idea of my brothers, brothers and sisters, as Christians. The Christian faith has a theology of suffering. It gives an understanding to where suffering comes from.

The fall of man, Adam and Eve, the fall of man into sin brought curse and dislocation and suffering as a consequence. Our theology also gives God's response to human suffering caused by sin.

[8 : 51] It's the gospel. God himself in Jesus Christ enters into a world of suffering in order to redeem us and to give us the hope of eternal life beyond suffering.

So the promise of our Christian faith is that while we will suffer now, there is glory to follow. There is freedom from suffering still to come.

That path that Jesus walked of suffering first, glory to follow, is the path that all his followers walk after him. And in this theology of suffering that the Christian faith has, James introduces us to another significant idea and it's this, that the sovereign God is able to use our trials, the suffering we endure, human evil even, to accomplish his good purposes in the world and in our lives.

And so as Christians we have answers in the Bible to the problem of suffering. The Bible says it has meaning and in our Emmanuel, God with us, we also have God's response.

We can have joy in trials as Christians if and when we can see through the trials to God's purpose. One thing that we recognize is that James is honest and the Bible is honest that trials and suffering are part of Christian experience.

[10 : 30] Notice verse 2, consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever, not if you face trials, but whenever you face trials. That was the preparation Jesus gave to the disciples before he was to die.

Opposition will be real, hatred will be real, trouble will come. Of course, Jesus offered them real hope as well. You belong to me, I have overcome the world, but Jesus is honest about the cost of discipleship.

What are these trials that James speaks about? These trials are external pressures and those are, in some measure, the suffering, the human experience that is common to everybody because we live in a fallen and a broken world, but there is also within that the particular suffering that people experience for being a Christian.

As Jesus said, you'll be hated as my followers. But notice that James deliberately keeps things vague and broad rather than specific.

Whenever you face trials of many kinds, this is a general principle he is introducing. In the letter of James, you see some of the trials that Christians experience.

[11 : 56] He'll talk about poverty, he'll talk about injustice and conflict and sickness and grief to name just some. So then it's perhaps surprising that he issues the command that he does in verse 2.

The command is to consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds. Now, he's not saying, and we'll notice this, he's not saying we should go out of our way to seek out suffering. We shouldn't be looking for ways to beat ourselves up and to make our life more difficult. nor is the Bible saying to us we should put on a happy face in pain and act like we are full of joy when our life is falling apart.

Rather, we can consider our trials joy because, verse 3, because of what God is doing. There is joy as we see through our trials to God's purpose.

When we see that God hasn't abandoned us, but rather is working in us and in those trials to give us a mature faith to conform us into the image of Christ, then we can have joy in our trials.

[13 : 20] I had a triumph over the Christmas holidays. As a kid, I grew up with our local news agent having magic eye posters for sale.

If you don't know what magic eye posters are, there's those pictures that were just a collection of random shapes and colours and you had to sort of go cross-eyed and look at them in a certain way and then these wonderful images would appear.

Well, I have never been able to see one of these magic eye pictures until the Christmas holidays and I was very delighted because the instruction all of a sudden made sense. It said, if you want to see this picture, you need to focus not on the page, you need to focus beyond the page.

When I did that, it all became clear. From a chaotic pattern came a nice animal picture. When we are facing trials and life seems chaos, how do we look through to see God's purpose?

What picture is God wanting us to see? What is it that we need to focus on through and beyond our trials? And it's this reality that God has a purpose.

[14 : 33] God has a purpose to grow our faith and to make us more like Jesus. Verse three, consider it joy because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

There's a testing process. It's the idea of a refining process, of dross being burned away, leaving the pure gold behind.

Trials have that effect on us as Christians. In different ways, perhaps that dross is to make us once again devoted and dependent on God.

Sometimes it's in trials that we realize the choking effects of idols in our lives that we are living for other things and it's only as we suffer that we realize that nothing else ultimately can help except for our God and Savior.

Perhaps the dross that trials burn away is that sense of self-reliance when all is going well. We can imagine we have the natural resources to deal with the situations we face and it's only when we get in above our heads that we cry out to God and we return to Him perhaps.

[15 : 52] Sometimes that testing process reveals to us that we've been squeezed into the world's mold, that we've been looking at things and considering truth from the wrong point of view and again these trials have the process of turning us back, they bring us to repentance.

So there is a refining process that goes on and it goes on so that the testing of our faith would develop perseverance, that it would develop in us staying power.

In the face of adversity we are not going to give up, we're not going to be those fair weather runners that go with God when all is well but when we face trial we are going to sit on the sidelines.

No, perseverance is God's intention. Just as an exercise our muscles are built by a process of resistance so the muscle of faith grows strong against the resistance of trials.

It's trials that test how strong our faith is and allows our faith to grow and develop with God's intention, verse 4, that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

[17:18] Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. That we would be able to give a Christian response as we suffer, that we might be dedicated to doing the will of God and being concerned for the glory of God even as life perhaps becomes difficult or chaotic.

We can think about the example of Job after tragedy and calamity came to him. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord or Jesus, the obedient sufferer.

Ultimately, God's aim, James tells us, is that we would be perfected. This is about the end of the journey, when we would know him perfectly, when we would be made like Christ, sinless and perfect.

That's the aim and trials are part of making us more like him, that we would be growing into that future reality day by day.

Trials do that for us. It was Martin Luther who said, affliction is the Christian's theologian. He was saying there are some lessons as Christians we can only learn as we experience trials, as God sends hard providences to us.

[19:00] Maturing takes place only in adversity. And so, James is saying we actually need this for the sake of our faith to mature.

God's ultimate purpose for us being to be more like Jesus, to ultimately become like him, requires us to go through trials. It made me think of a butterfly, you know, that metamorphosis of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

Imagine if we were to come across a butterfly fighting to get out of its cocoon and we were to sense, maybe to hear the tiny flapping of wings and to sense the struggle, maybe to see it trying to get out. We would try and short circuit the process to help it on its way to open up the cocoon, to let the butterfly fly for free. What would happen was that butterfly would fall to the ground and have no hope.

It needs that resistance so that its wings can be strengthened. And so too as Christians we need trials in order to strengthen and mature our faith.

[20:12] And as we go through trials, as we experience hardships, we remember that Jesus has gone there before us. In fact if we turn back in our Bible just one page, Hebrews chapter 12, Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 2, we are encouraged as Christians to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. If we feel that we are growing weary as we battle through trial, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus, to see that he has faced the suffering of the cross with joy for what that would accomplish. For him that meant returning to glory, to be in the right hand of the Father, but also it would mean his bringing many sons and daughters to glory in the fullness of time also.

When we fix our eyes on him, the author to the Hebrews says, that's our antidote to weariness and losing heart. To remember, as we go through trials, our God will enable us, will provide for us, will walk with us so that we might have joy in trials.

That's the first point. That's the main thing for us to see. But we're not done here. Second question, thinking about verse 5, what if you and I don't find joy in our trials?

[22:01] Sometimes the book of James can seem like he dots around from topic to topic and we might think he's moved from trial, now he's talking about wisdom. But I think we should see these two topics relate to one another.

If we don't find joy in our trials, we should ask our generous and gracious Father for wisdom to see from his perspective, to see his purpose.

Let's read verse 5 together again. 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.

So notice there's a linking word. Verse 4, the goal is that we would not be lacking anything. Then verse 5, if you do lack wisdom. So if when it comes to trials, we find ourselves time and again profoundly fearful or forgetful of what God has taught us in the past, if we always find ourselves wrestling with, why me?

Why this? Why now? When we're really struggling to know what good purpose trials can accomplish, we are to ask our Father for wisdom, to learn how to look at our reality so that we can give him glory with the providence that we are going through.

[23 : 27] Notice, and this is important, James doesn't say to us we should ask for knowledge. Rather, we should ask for wisdom. Sometimes we want to know the why and the what.

But James says, rather, you should ask for wisdom, to know how to respond to our circumstances, to know the will of God so that we might apply it to our day-to-day life.

The book of Job is a classic example of someone who suffers and he's never told why, but he's invited to know God. And once he is in the presence of God, once God reveals himself, he is content.

James, being a wisdom book, we can perhaps remind ourselves of the book of Proverbs, where we are reminded that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom for us looks like catching hold of God's character in the middle of our trials so that we are able to remember our good God, our gracious Father.

[24 : 36] Wisdom is more important than knowledge for us when we're going through trials. We are in the digital age when almost any type of information is available to us.

We are in the Ask Alexa age and there's wonderful opportunities in that and it's a good thing, but it's limited. We can have access to all the knowledge in the world, but that does not and it will not make us wise.

So James is not saying to us, ask that we would know it all, but rather trust the one who does know it all. That we would hold on to God's character.

That we would recognize when trials come that our God is a gracious and a generous Father, that we wouldn't lose sight of that and that we would ask Him for wisdom.

Verse 5 is helpful for reminding us of the qualities of God that we discover in the gospel.

[25 : 42] We discover in receiving faith and receiving salvation that we have a God of generous grace. We have a God who is generous to all.

This grace that He offers isn't just for an elite. No, it's for anyone who will hear and believe and in the same way this wisdom is for all God's children.

Whoever we are, God makes His wisdom available to us. And He will do it without finding fault. Just as when we came to Jesus and we were repenting of sin and we wanted to trust in Him, the Father wasn't shaking His head or tut-tutting for past mistakes.

Rather, we are welcomed by a generous God of great grace. So it is when it comes to His giving us wisdom.

The same God who is generous in salvation, it is generous in supplying wisdom. So if we lack it, we should ask and it will be given.

[26 : 57] James is reminding us that God doesn't change so we should trust His promises. Just as Jesus said, ask and it will be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.

God is not reluctant to give us the wisdom that we need. Rather, God is generous and longing to give that wisdom so that when we face trials, we'd have the right perspective on them so that we might find joy because we'd see God's purpose.

But it's important for us to understand that wisdom is connected to the Word of God. That we can't expect wisdom from God if we are not being connected to the source of that wisdom.

Where do we go when we're looking for God's wisdom? We go to His Word and we ask the Spirit to reveal His truth and supply what is lacking.

We need word and prayer and fellowship if we are to receive the wisdom that God wants to give to us. And of course, we need union with Christ who is Himself the very wisdom of God.

[28 : 10] As Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, we preach Christ crucified to the Jews, a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So if we are struggling to find joy in trials, we are to ask God for wisdom. One last question.

As we think about ourselves, do I trust God to give me joy in trials? Do I think that's something God wants to give?

Do I believe it's something He can give? For this, we're going to look at verses 6 to 8. And in here, we have a warning against doubt and against divided loyalties.

Verse 6, 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.

[29 : 16] That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. Just as we teach our children that there's a right way and a wrong way to ask, so it is when we ask for wisdom, the right way is to trust.

To trust God's character and to trust God's Word. And for that to be a solid foundation. That before we come to trials, we want to have that foundation in our life that God's character is trustworthy and so is His Word.

In the middle of trials and suffering, it's hard to build a solid theology it's hard sometimes to recognize and grasp the character of God.

This is something we need to do even before trials come. To determine that I can and I will trust God and trust God as He's revealed in His Word.

So the right way to ask is to believe, to trust, but the wrong way is to doubt, is to be double-minded, is to have those divided loyalties.

[30 : 28] Because when we ask that way, James says, we won't receive anything from the Lord.

So if we're saying, well, I'll ask God and I'll look into His Word for wisdom, but I'll also listen to the world and I'll listen to what popular culture and the people around me have to say about suffering, we're going to get very conflicted messages.

Because when it comes to the voice of the world, as they talk about trial and suffering, it's very hard for people to see any purpose in hardship, in trial, in suffering.

The whole purpose of our existence seems to be that we would be happy and live pain-free and carefree lives, that we would entertain ourselves until death.

That the voice of the world would say, avoid suffering and hardship at all costs. Would even challenge us and say, well, a good God would never allow this, that, and the next thing.

So if we're listening to that voice, then we won't receive the wisdom from God. When we try and keep a foot in both camps and we're not sure where ultimate truth lies, the outcome is that we will not receive the help that we need as we go through our trials.

[31 : 48] Verse 6 says, we'll be like a wave in a stormy sea, sort of tossed about and going nowhere. I think I've probably mentioned before, swimming off the coast of Peru and getting stuck in sort of riptides and feeling like I was in a washing machine.

I had no clue of which way was up and which way was down. It was probably the worst experience of my life and it was danger for those moments. For us as Christians, that's not a place we want to be.

We will only make progress and mature through trials if we have a clear direction where we're going to trust God and His Word, even if it's difficult. There's danger in being the double-minded man, the man who is unstable in all he does.

Again, to stick with a water-related image, it made me think of what you see sometimes at church camp. So I used to help out at church camps a fair bit and a lot of camps would have sort of team-building exercises.

They'd have raft-building exercises. And every so often, you'd find one group that prepared something that could only very loosely be connected with anything remotely seaworthy.

[33 : 14] And so there'd be some brave souls who'd be like, regardless, I'm going to get on this thing, which we'll call a raft. But there might be that one person who just wasn't convinced, wasn't convinced by the workmanship that had gone in.

And so you could see them kind of standing on the edge, kind of wanting to lift that foot. And, you know, if you ever find yourself in a position where you've got one foot on the shore and one foot on an unstable raft, you know you're going for an early swim.

And you can see that. And it's the same in our Christian experience. Doing the spiritual splits is dangerous. That we will not find wisdom from God unless we are committed to trusting His will.

And so James is saying to us, right at the beginning of his letter, that in our trials, and we will face trials, we are to trust in the character of our generous God, to believe that He is at work in us

through trials, that they are not pointless, that He is renovating us, He is preparing us for glory, He's making us more like Jesus, so that we might find joy in trials through faith in Jesus, our Savior, our suffering Savior, our great high priest, the one who now intercedes with us, the one who sympathizes with us in our weakness, the one who doesn't leave us alone in our trials. And we find our hope in knowing Him as our Savior and having God as our Father. you and you to