

Trials and Joys

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 February 2020

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 01] Please turn with me to the book of James. The book of James. Recent New Testament scholarship has identified the book of James as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

So when I came out of Free Church College in 2003, it wasn't thought of that way. So I first preached a series of the book of James in the prayer meeting here using 12 sermons to go through the whole book.

Recent scholarship has denied me that privilege because it says you can't do that anymore. And so if you want to know how many sermons we're going to be preaching, look at how many paragraphs there are in the chapters and in the books.

Because in general, the paragraph will give you the length of the meaning of a passage. And that's the length we're going to be using for each sermon. Let's read from verse 2 to verse 4.

This is the exception, by the way. Verse 2 to verse 4. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

[1 : 12] Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Perhaps if you were choosing to write a letter, you wouldn't start where James, the brother of our Lord, does here.

With the trials of the Christian life. Maybe we'd want to ease our readers into this rather unpopular topic. Hiding it in the middle of a letter.

And then perhaps referring to it only sheepishly. But then we aren't James. And James isn't us. And he's not writing to comfortable 21st century Christians.

He's writing it to Jewish Christians in the first century who were genuinely suffering on account of their faith in Jesus Christ. And they want real life answers to real life situations.

Their problems in life don't consist of broken fingernails or cold flat whites. Their problems consist in being imprisoned for their faith.

[2 : 23] And having all their property and possessions confiscated by governments hostile to the Christian gospel. As we discovered last week, the message of the book of James is faith that works.

Faith at work. And for the first century Christians to whom James is writing, if the Christian faith does not work when it's under pressure, then it doesn't work.

Period. Period. So for James there's no point in easing into the most important of subjects for his readers. And that's why he starts the way he does.

With the trials of the Christian life. But in what seems to be a great paradox, trials and joys belong together. Sorrows and blessings in the Christian life are friends and not enemies.

So this evening as we begin to enter into the body of James' letter, we'll discover two things together. First of all, the features of Christian trials. And secondly, the opportunities of Christian trials.

[3 : 33] This is faith at work under pressure. Christ's grace available for those whose life is more of a bed of nails than it is a bed of roses.

First of all then, the features of Christian trials. The features of Christian trials. According to James in these verses, the trials Christians face have four features.

They are predictable, they are purifying, they are productive, and they are perfecting. You'll notice I'm calling them Christian trials. Because I want to distinguish them as particular trials we face on account of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Every human being goes through difficult times, and it's got nothing to do with our faith in Jesus. James, rather, is talking about the trials we face as Christians.

On account of our being Christians. And according to him, they are predictable, purifying, productive, and perfecting. They are predictable, first of all.

[4 : 43] Predictable. James begins, Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. He does not say, if you face trials of many kinds, but whenever you face trials of many kinds.

The trials of the Christian life are predictable in at least this. There will be trials. It is entirely inevitable that there are times in our Christian lives where we're forced to sleep on beds of nails because we are disciples of Jesus.

Take it for a certainty. If you're following Jesus and you're living close to him, you will undergo trials. Now, of course, we know that James' teaching here runs counter to much of today's Christianity, which insists that the moment you trust in Jesus, all your problems will disappear.

Because all God really wants for you is to be healthy and wealthy. But I think you can see from James that trials in the Christian life are a certainty.

They're not a sign of sin. They're a certainty. The Christians to whom James is writing this letter have been forced to flee from Jerusalem because they were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

[6 : 08] They're now refugees in other parts of the Middle East. So their particular trial, it would seem, from this passage and the rest of the book of James, is their poverty.

They've had all their possessions confiscated. Their houses in Jerusalem now belong to Herod and the Romans. All their money's gone.

And all because they're Christians. Normal Jewish people aren't allowed to do business with them. They're dirty. These early Christians are not respected members of society.

They are rejected members of society. And therefore, they are desperately poor. You know, we talk about first world problems today. We get junk calls at inappropriate times of the day.

We have a slow broadband speed. We have no right to complain and call these things trials. When our first brothers and sisters in Christ were dying of hunger and their children were dying of illness because they dared to call Christ their king.

[7 : 19] If we are living as Jesus' disciples, it is a certainty we will experience trials. It's not a probability.

It's not an if. It's a certainty. It's a whenever you face trials. It is entirely predictable.

We will face trials in the Christian life. What is not so predictable is when these trials will happen or what form they will take.

After all, James talks, does he not, of trials of many kinds? Many kinds. The word the NIV translates there as many kinds is the same word it uses to talk of all the different colors in Joseph's coat of many colors.

I can't tell you exactly what particular form your trial will take. It may be mental illness.

[8 : 22] It may be emotional isolation or lostness. It may be social exclusion. It may be spiritual oppression.

It may be poverty. Or it might just be that we have to abandon all our dreams for worldly security because we want to follow Christ into radical service for him.

I don't know. I can't say. I can't predict the form your particular trial will take. But what I do know is that it will be.

It will not be the same as my trial. It will be your trial. But that you will have trial is absolutely certain. Second, this trial or these trials are purifying. They are purifying. James talks in verse 3 about these trials being the testing of your faith.

[9 : 28] There are different ways in which the writer of the New Testament talk of the testing of our faith. So, for example, we've written Peter. And he talks of the testing of our faith in the context of ensuring that there is any such thing as faith at all within us.

But James is different. But James is different. He's convinced that those to whom he's writing are genuine believers in Christ. And therefore, he's using this word testing in the context of refinement, of purifying.

You will know that metals are mined in the form of their ores. The most common, perhaps, is aluminium, found in the form of bauxite.

Bauxite is the ore of aluminium. And therefore, when it's mined, bauxite needs to be heated to exceptionally high temperatures to remove all its impurities.

And that's the kind of testing to which James here is referring. That through the process of experiencing various trials, whatever they may be, the faith of the Christian is purified and her impurities are removed.

[10:41] As she is heated to high temperature, as she is exposed and squeezed under extreme pressure, she's purified. Her doubts are removed and her questions are answered.

The grace of Christ is once again proved sufficient for all her weakness. Notice how James begins, verse 2, with the word consider.

Think about it, he says. When we're experiencing difficulties in our Christian lives, it can be difficult to engage the grey matter.

But engage it, we must think about it, James says. This trial, which is very painful in my life, it composes the testing of my faith.

The purifying of my devotion to Christ. When we prayed, Lord, I want to be pure. And I want to be holy.

[11:47] And I want to be like Jesus. Didn't we know that the path to our purity in Christ's likeness would lie in the testing of our faith?

Third, Christian trials are productive. They are productive. When we're going through difficult times in our Christian lives, we sometimes conclude to ourselves, well, they have no purpose.

We say, what's happening to me? Why is this happening to me? I don't know why this is happening to me. I'm not glib enough to have all the answers to our painful questions.

But what I do know from this passage is that what happens to us happens for a reason. God's behind it all. God is working out his purposes in our lives.

And far from these trials being purposeless, they can be deeply productive. In verse 3, James says, the testing of your faith develops perseverance, as other translations perhaps render it, steadfastness, endurance, stickability, tenacity.

[13:04] I think we get the idea. The testing of our faith through trials produces stickability in the Christian. Tenacity, steadfast endurance, that resolution which says, whatever should happen to me as a result of being a Christian, I will not give up.

I will not give up. You know, the first two weeks of January were a nightmare in our local gym. You couldn't book a class.

You couldn't get onto any of the machines. Because hundreds of people had got there before you. New Year resolutioners who had promised to get fit in 2020. But the second two weeks in January had rather quietened down as those who lacked resolution fell away.

Their resolution, you see, didn't really mean very much. If we should approach the trials of our Christian lives with the right attitude, they shall prove immensely productive in producing within us resilience and tenacity, endurance and perseverance.

You see, not only does the path to purity lie in the testing of our faith, the path to perseverance also lies in the testing of our faith through Christian trials. Some Christians use trials in their lives as an excuse to walk away from Christ.

[14:43] They do. But if approached from a James-like perspective, trials cease to be obstacles to the faith.

They become opportunities for a deepening faith. And then lastly, the last feature of Christian trials is they are perfecting.

They are perfecting. Now, James was a Jewish Christian. He had been brought up knowing and cherishing the history and heritage and traditions of his people. And when it came to trial, two great Old Testament figures stood head and shoulders above everyone else.

Abraham and Job. Abraham was tested concerning his faithfulness to God when God commanded him to give up Isaac.

Job was tested with great trials. To prove his faithfulness to God. Abraham and Job. Believers whose faith was tested as they experienced many trials and through them developed tenacity and steadfast endurance.

[15:58] Abraham and Job. Two men who were more mature and more complete in their faith than any of the other Old Testament characters.

And why was that? It was because they allowed perseverance to finish its work in them. This consists the perfection of our faith when perseverance and endurance is proved over many years and decades of believing in Christ and experiencing trials.

Becoming the perfect Christian does not consist in learning new spiritual gifts. that consists in persevering over many years.

In the face of trial. No one can ever say, I have finally learned how to persevere as a Christian because there's always more to learn about perseverance and endurance as a Christian.

There are perhaps for you and for me greater trials left to be experienced and greater challenges yet to be met.

[17 : 13] You know, when you walk along the beach you'll come across many smooth stones. These stones weren't originally smooth.

They were made smooth by many years of being ground against other stones. And that long-term grinding effect smoothed off the stone's rough edges until finally you had a mature, rounded, smooth stone.

That stone I'm going to use as a skimmer. In the same way a perfect faith is only achieved through a lifetime of endurance.

perseverance. The Christian can never say enough, I've had enough because there's always more perseverance to be learned and endurance to be attained.

So that aluminium bike frame that cost you thousands of pounds when you bought it, it was once a rock in the ground called bauxite and then the process of refinement began.

[18 : 25] That smooth stone that you have on your windowsill was once a jagged rock on the sea and then the process of attrition and grinding began.

That well-toned athlete we want to be like was once a skiff of a boy and then the process of training began. That mature Christian that you so admire and want to be like was once a very unstable young man but then the process of perfecting began.

You see, these early Jewish Christians, they were really suffering on account of their faith in Jesus. From the rest of the book of James, it would seem that their primary suffering lay in their poverty.

That they'd become poor because they were Christians. Well, they needed to know that those trials they're experiencing, that they're predictable, that they're purifying, that they're productive, that they're perfecting.

What was true for them is no less true for us today that the various social, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual trials that we experience are predictable, purifying, productive, and perfecting.

[19 : 55] That God in his gospel purposes has our pain and grace for us in our suffering. The features of Christian trials.

But then secondly, the opportunities of Christian trials. The opportunity of Christian trials. The poem goes, Two men looked out from prison bars.

One saw mud, the other stars. How important it is when we're experiencing the trials of the Christian life that we're like the man who looked out of his prison cell and saw the stars.

Then we see the bigger picture. As I said earlier, when we're going through difficult times in our lives, it can be hard to consider and to think intelligently through why we're experiencing what we are.

But that's precisely what faith at work will do for us. It will look beyond the experience to begin seeing God's greater purpose in our trials.

[21 : 07] And as I see it from James 1, 2 through 4, God presents us with three opportunities in the trials we face.

An opportunity for joy, for fellowship, and for hope. It's almost like James is saying to us, you know, two men looked out from their Christian trials.

One saw problems. The other saw opportunities. It's an opportunity, first of all, for joy. James begins, verse 2, consider it pure joy.

Joy? Joy when we're suffering poverty and persecution for our faith in Christ? Really? Is James, is he right in the head?

We might ask. And yes, he is, because what he says is in line with the rest of the New Testament. Remember how in the Beatitudes Jesus said, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me?

[22 : 17] He said, rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. But in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. According to James, according to Jesus, trials in the Christian life are opportunities for joy.

Oh, not the painfulness of the trial. That's not pleasurable. We're not to be sadists to enjoy the pain of the trial. That's not what James is saying.

Rather, consider what these trials are achieving for us. The productivity of our endurance and the perfecting of our faith. We begin to see God's purpose in them.

We know that we are standing in the lines of thousands of faithful Christians who've gone before us, as the apostle says, in being counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.

It's joy. It is pure joy in knowing that God is doing something with us. He is refining us. He is purifying us. That he's producing within us endurance and stickability, tenacity in our faith.

[23 : 33] That God's making us rounded and mature. Maybe it's not just me. Maybe it's you as well.

But it seems to me that the most joyful Christians I know are those who have suffered most for their faith in Christ. They're filled with joy even though their bodies bear the scars of being beaten for their faith in Christ and their minds bear the scars of repeated rejections and betrayals.

they can't hide their joy because they've grasped the opportunity trial presents to become mature and rounded in their faith.

Perhaps one of the reasons we seem to lack so much joy in the western church is because we don't really know what it means. We don't really know what it means to suffer persecution for our faith in Jesus yet.

Second, our trials are an opportunity for fellowship. An opportunity for fellowship. James' favorite term is to describe the fellowship of Christian believers brothers which later in those translations of the Bible rightly interpret not translate but interpret as brothers and sisters because James has got no gender exclusivity in mind by using this title brothers.

[25 : 00] Consider it pure joy my brothers. And what James seems to be saying is that our suffering isn't merely our suffering.

It belongs to the brothers. It belongs to the brotherhood of believers. When I say that what I don't mean is that others suffer exactly the same in exactly the same ways we do but that our trials are opportunities for the strengthening of our fellowship with other believers.

When I know that you are standing firm in your faith in spite of great opposition it strengthens me in my faith.

And when you know that even though I'm being persecuted for my faith in Christ I will not give up. it motivates you to persevere also.

And of course this all goes without saying that James by calling the fellowship my brothers is placing himself on the same level as those to whom he's writing that he too is admitting I am enduring various trials which represent the testing of my faith.

[26 : 27] What joins him to his people isn't just a shared gospel it's a shared experience of the trials of his Christian life. I notice a worrying trend in today's church namely that our ministers should present themselves as being above sadness and grief above trials and suffering above weakness and doubt lest they be considered sub-Christian but James following the example of his brother Jesus rejoices in his weakness and trials knowing they place him on the same level as everybody else.

Sometimes you know we can use our trials to as an excuse to withdraw from other Christians. we fear while I'm going through the mill I don't think anyone will want to know what I'm going through I'm ashamed of this.

Don't we know that our trials if we approach them from the correct perspective will only strengthen our love and affection for each other as together we fight for each other and pray for one another's endurance in the faith?

Do you ever do that when you see a Christian going through trial going through difficulties in their life? Do you pray for their endurance in the faith? One of the greatest ways you can encourage other Christians is by telling them how God has made you a more rounded stickable Christian through the trials you have experienced.

a church which suffers together stays together a church which suffers together stays together and then lastly and briefly our trials are an opportunity for hope hope faith that works is a faith that perseveres to the end one of the things that we don't often factor into our reading of the book of James is what theologians called eschatology eschatology in other words these early Christians were fixated by what they called the last days they were always looking forward to Jesus coming in power and to their being with him in the new heavens and the new earth one of the reasons these

early Christians were so filled with such a vibrant hope was because their eyes were fixed on the future blessings of their salvation that a day was coming when their sin would be completely gone and then they would see Jesus in the perfection of holiness had to be this way for them life was hard and being a

[29 : 32] Christian made life all the harder if you were a first century Jew their hearts longed to be at home with Jesus and we factor that into James' equation you quickly realize that the experience of trials for the Christian the purifying perfecting productive purpose of God in them all is overwhelmed and subsumed in Christian hope but they're achieving something for us which although we might never see it here and now will be seen later in heaven to use the words of the old hymn we used to sing as kids James is telling us if you won't bear the cross here you won't wear the crown there that if you're unwilling to suffer with Jesus here you'll never be with

Jesus there the trials that we're experiencing as Christians are fitting us for heaven they're preparing us to be in the closer presence of the holy one before whom anything less than perfection is dirty when we're going through trials in our Christian lives if all we ever do is look at the dirt we'll never see the higher purpose of God in it all we love to sing the hymn away in a manger but it's not the manger of Christ which fits us for heaven to be with Christ there it is the manger of Christian trials which fits us for heaven to be with Christ there so no wonder then James begins his letter by referring to the various trials the Christians to whom he's writing and experiencing they don't want waffle from James they don't want a false health and wealth prosperity gospel they need real answers to the real problems that they're really facing and James gives them just that he identifies four features of the trials they're facing as Christians they are predictable they are purifying they are productive and they are perfecting and then he turns these trials on their head and presents them as opportunities for joy for fellowship and for hope and now this remains where are you in this story of

James 1 2-4 I'm not going to ask you if you're experiencing any trials in your Christian life right now I'm going to ask what trials you are experiencing in your Christian life right now because if you are living as a faithful disciple of Christ you most certainly will experience some kind of trial what then is your attitude to them to men looked out of a prison cell one saw bars the other saw stars how then are you viewing the trials of the Christian life as dirt or as delight let us pray Lord we thank you for the practical teaching of Jesus earthly brother James we thank you for his maturity in the faith and we thank you for the infallibility of scripture scripture and for how it speaks to us today though written by a man 2000 years ago in a very different part of the world yet it relates so well to us today because all of us in one way or another are disadvantaged on account of our faith in Jesus some of us perhaps younger ones feel excluded from the things our classmates do in school because we know they just aren't right some of us older ones perhaps feel that there are certain career opportunities close to us because we want to remain faithful to you some of us feel that serving you has cost us more than we could afford to pay but whatever it is oh

Lord we consider it joy to experience these various trials because we know that the testing of our faith has produced within us stickability tenacity endurance and steadfastness and that this had to continue its work so that we may be perfect and rounded and mature in the faith we ask these things in Jesus name Amen