

Hardship and joy

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[0 : 0 0] so job chapter 42 and starting at verse 1 then job answered the lord and said i know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted who is this that hides counsel without knowledge therefore i have uttered what i did not understand things too wonderful for me which i did not know here and i will speak i will question you and you make it known to me i had heard of you by the hearing of the ear but now my eye sees you therefore i despise myself and repent in dust and ashes after the lord had spoken these words to job the lord said to eliphaz the temanite temanite my anger burns against you and against your two friends for you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant job has now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves and my servant job shall pray for you for i will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly for you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant job has so eliphaz the temanite and bildad the shuhite and zophar the namathite went and did what the lord had told them and the lord accepted job's prayer and the lord restored the fortunes of job when he had prayed for his friends and the lord gave job twice as much as he had before then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before and ate bread with him in his house and they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the lord had brought upon him and each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold and the lord blessed the latter days of job more than his beginning and he had fourteen thousand sheep six thousand camels one thousand jake of oxen and one thousand female donkeys he had also seven sons and three daughters and he called the name of the first daughter jemima and the name of the second kezia and the name of the third karen hapuk and in the land there were no women so beautiful as job's daughters and their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers and after this job lived a hundred and forty years and saw his sons and his son's sons four generations and job died an old man and full of days the second reading is from the letter of james on pages 1215 of the church bibles starting from verse one of chapter one james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the twelve tribes in the dispersion greetings count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask god who gives graciously to all without reproach and it will be given him 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 let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich 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

morning everyone thomas thanks very much for reading please do keep your bibles open well let me pray together as we look at james james says later on but be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourselves for if anyone is a hearer of the word not a doer he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in the mirror for he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like heavenly father we praise you very much for the extraordinary privilege we have of gathering around your word this morning and we pray that you would grant us humility please help us to be not simply hearers but doers and we ask it in jesus name amen now one of the longest running reality tv shows is i'm a celebrity get me out of here you may have watched some of it a number of celebrities are put in a jungle environment for a number of weeks they're put through a number of trials none of which are for the squeamish as far as i can work out each one competing to be crowned queen or king of the jungle it's a clever title they are celebrities at any point when the hardships and deprivations get too great they can simply drop out and go home well it seems to me there's a christian equivalent to that game show something like i'm a christian get me out of here i think it's how if we're honest many of us respond when life is hard we pray perhaps along the lines of i don't like this this painful scary uncertain situation please get me out of here take away that the pain the hard situation the uncertainty and then life will be much better i wonder if you can relate to that kind of prayer i certainly can now i've been recommending this book by paul mallard invest your suffering over these last couple of weeks or so his wife idri became ill when she was pregnant with their fourth child after a number of visits to doctors and consultants she was diagnosed with a chronic degenerative disorder which has meant that she's had to live her life in a wheelchair for the last 30 years and the book takes you on their journey together but the title is not lord get me out of here the title is invest your suffering and as we know an investment brings a return because one of the wonderful privileges of knowing the lord jesus christ is that we can view suffering and hardship very differently very differently from the world around us if you're not yet a christian then i hope you've begun to see that through this series of talks on hardship and this morning we're looking at the letter of james where god wants us to see that the trials of life provide us with a unique opportunity if only we'd grasp it but to do that we need to know two things we need firstly to know how to think about hardship and secondly we need to know how to pray about hardship firstly how to think about hardship

have a look have a look at verses one and two james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the twelve tribes in the dispersion greetings count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds oh wonderful it's now up on the screen as well excellent thanks james now i don't know about you but verse two makes me feel very uncomfortable it seems so at odds with experience the hardships of the last few months certainly for me have not been joyful they have been difficult but what james is describing here is not some kind of spiritual christian who is in a different league from the rest of us now to understand what he's saying i think it's helpful to focus on two phrases firstly when you meet trials of various kinds now the james of verse one is most likely the half brother of the lord jesus he's addressing these christians notice in verse one as the twelve tribes in the dispersion in other words he's using old testament language to describe new testament believers like the twelve tribes of israel they belong to god as his special people and like them after the exile they are dispersed they are scattered in the world it means that for the christian trials will come and trials of various kinds will come some because we live in a world that is hostile to jesus trials which come our way in other words specifically because we belong to him opposition persecution hatred even as we are thinking about in john chapter 15 a few weeks ago others come because like the exiled believers of the old testament we haven't yet reached our final destination we still live in a fallen groaning world and although christians are a special people we are not a protected species we experience the same hardships and difficulties as everyone else illness accidents unemployment hardness bereavement sadness pain unexpected events the second phrase i want us just to think about is count it all joy that is very strange isn't it now of course for the unbeliever trials can only ever be bad because this life is all we get and therefore we need to make the most of all the joy and and happiness and fulfillment we can but for the christian life it's very different the word count means come to a settled conviction it's about making a definitive decision about the nature of trials as a time of joy and let's not get

James wrong here he's not calling on us to deny reality you know to pretend that hardship is joyous when it's obviously not but rather to think differently from the way in which we would naturally think about it such that amidst the tears and anger and confusion there is also a learned response of joy which sets us apart from those who don't know the lord jesus what do you say that all sounds fine in theory but what does that look like and how is it possible in practice well because verse 3 you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness steadfastness not kind of gritting your teeth to get through it but growth in christian character perseverance being firmed up as a christian believer and notice verse 4 with a clear end in sight and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing perfection the word doesn't so much mean perfect as well developed it's a word that's about maturity completeness lacking in nothing now in your better moments do you not long to be that kind of christian you see the danger is that we only interpret hardship negatively because we lose sight of the god given purpose instead we're to count hardship and trials as joy precisely because of what our heavenly father achieves through them lots of things in life are like that in many ways the joy of doing hard difficult challenging things even painful things because of what they achieve you know perhaps going to the gym or going for a run or swimming in the unheated swimming pool in Brockwell

Park enjoyable certainly doesn't look like it as you see people pacing round Dunwich Park for three miles on a Saturday morning and yet there is an enjoyment in it the knowledge that it's purposeful you're getting stronger fitter more resilient would you like to be stronger and more resilient as a disciple of the Lord Jesus more prayerful a greater love for him a deeper delight in his word perhaps less wavering in your loyalty to him perhaps more consistent in your lifestyle more consistent in your witness to colleagues and friends less erratic in your conduct clearer on the gospel with greater staying power consistency endurance and stickability Alec Mateer says in his commentary on these verses and I put the quote on the outline there is no trial no great calamity or small pressure no overwhelming sorrow or small rub of life that is outside the plan of God whereby it is a stepping stone to glory and it is for this reason that our settled conviction must be to appraise it as all joy not because it is joyful in itself but because it is the only way forward to become perfect and complete lacking in nothing because the fact is that pain and trials change us in the way that happiness rarely does

[15 : 30] I think we all know this from our experience you know I can enjoy a wonderful holiday full of fun relaxing and I can feel rested afterwards but actually that holiday won't change me deeply on the inside and a few weeks later you know how it is you feel you need another holiday whereas trials do those in our youth group jammed studying Ecclesiastians on Sunday evenings one of the questions the book asks is if you were given two invitations one to a funeral and the other to a party which one would you accept assuming they were both at the same time you couldn't go to both I got the invitations here one to a funeral sombre black the other to a party bright exciting orange you can't go to them both which one would you go to well the answer is obvious you go to the funeral you go to the funeral because you'll learn so much more from it what's life about what matters in life what's next you won't learn any of those things from the party but here's the catch in verse three the idea that trials produce perseverance and steadfastness it's not a passive process

James is not saying that all you need to do is to experience enough trials in your life and you'll grow to maturity because when life is hard we can so often can't we find ourselves kicking and fighting against it we can rail against God we can find ourselves angry and so upset that my plans for my life have been disrupted it that we end up losing sight of what God is actually doing do you see it's not that the trials themselves automatically produce steadfastness rather it is our perseverance under trials that produces steadfastness just think of Job in the Old Testament we had that reading from the end of Job and we've already thought about James chapter 5 verse 11 which also mentions

Job just flick over to it James chapter 5 verse 11 behold we consider those blessed who remain steadfast you have heard of the steadfastness of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord how the Lord is compassionate and merciful do you notice it's that steadfast word again James experienced the most terrible suffering he wasn't told why he was going through it and yet at the end he kneels down before God in that chapter we had read to us and he says something like this he says God you are great you're wise you're big you're clever I don't know why I've gone through all this stuff but I now trust you and I know you are glorious and I am in awe of you now I wouldn't wish Job's sufferings on anyone and yet it is wonderfully purposeful that is how you and I are to think about hardship which are counted as joy because it is purposeful so imagine for a moment you're writing down all the experiences of your life you've got an hour or two and there are a couple of columns on a piece of paper so one column is headed joy at the top the other column is headed miserable at the top and you go through all the experiences of your life and you've either got to put them in the joyful column or the miserable column

James is saying that in our thinking we need to put the trials of life in the joyful column and of course because we so easily put them in the miserable column or they might start in the joyful column but then they kind of nudge over into the miserable column we need to make sure we keep putting them in the joyful column and that they stay there not because they feel joyful they probably won't but because they help us mature as Christians and they keep us following Jesus rather than drifting away from him so how to think about hardship secondly how to pray about hardship verses 5 to 11 now we don't tend to think of trials as joy because we don't tend to focus on what the Lord is doing through them my prayer back in the autumn was simply Lord get me out of here

I want to feel better and while it's good to pray for healing and we see that later on in the letter of James we also need to pray for wisdom verse 5 if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him how do you pray for yourself and others when life is tough if growth groups are anything to go by it's often Lord please will you fix this problem because I just want life to get back to normal again but do we pray for wisdom that we'd see trials as the Lord Jesus sees trials that we wouldn't lose sight of their purpose that we'd have joy in them now of course it may well be that actually if we're honest with ourselves in our heart this isn't really a journey that we want to go down it just feels too hard too painful and too challenging in which case will you just focus on verse 5 for a moment because I love the way it starts with the phrase let him ask

[22 : 09] God who gives generously it literally means let him ask the giving God because of course it's God's character to give the most famous verse in the Bible for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life one of the great temptations when life is hard is to forget that God is a giving God or to imagine that he's perhaps in the habit of giving us gifts that actually we'd rather not have or even that he is the withholding God rather than the giving God but he is the giving God and he will continue to give and that is why he doesn't simply helicopter us out of trials because that would keep us immature and lacking in steadfastness instead he continues to be generous even in the hardest of circumstances he continues to give and that may be just an encouragement that some of us need to hear this morning and yet we need to see that there's also a warning have a look at verses 6 to 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 mustn't suppose that he will receive anything from the

Lord he is double minded unstable in all his ways now let's be clear James is not talking here about honest doubts he's not saying we need to have perfect faith after all when life is hard we inevitably have plenty of fears and lots of questions instead it's a warning about the danger of trying to go in two directions at the same time or as he puts it in verse 8 the danger of being double minded literally double sold it's one of the themes of the letter such that on the one hand we read James 1 verses 2 to 4 and we think to ourselves and we think yep I'm going to think and pray I want to be like that as a Christian I do want to be steadfast I do want to be mature I do want to be complete and that's the end to which I'm going to pray when life is difficult and yet on the other hand we still want to be successful we still want to live the kind of life that we have mapped out for ourselves the easy comfortable successful life that we imagine everyone else is living in other words a double minded conflict between on the one hand our loyalty to the

Lord Jesus and his agenda and on the other hand we feel torn by the world's agenda the sort of prayers perhaps that say Lord I want your help in trouble so I can be in control and get my life back on track again so do we pray with a genuine trust in God's good purposes not our own in other words trusting that the jigsaw that he is creating and assembling with all the different pieces of our lives is so much greater and more wonderful than the jigsaw that we would make with the different pieces of our lives and parents we can so easily be double minded as well can't we in the way in which we pray for our children of course we want them to follow Jesus but we can so often also want them to have everything the world offers whether it's the best educational academic success or sporting or musical achievements or whatever it is or a good job or comfortable lifestyle and in our double mindedness we can find ourselves protecting them from trials and therefore depriving them of one of the great ways in which the

Lord God in his kindness works in them or perhaps even we find ourselves railing against God and getting angry with God as our children face trials and we lose sight of his good fatherly ever giving purpose for them many of us will have heard of Joni Erickson she lived a very active life all the way through her teenage years horse riding swimming running tennis and so on until as a teenager in the 1960s she dived into the sea but tragically she misjudged the depth of the water and she was left paralysed from the shoulders down in 2010 she received a diagnosis of cancer from which she recovered in 2018 she received a second diagnosis of cancer and this is what she wrote on receiving that second diagnosis when I received the unexpected news of cancer from my surgeon

I relaxed and smiled knowing that my sovereign God loves me dearly and holds me tightly in his hands what good is it if we only trust the Lord when we understand his ways that only guarantees a life filled with doubts now we may not all be able to think that immediately on hearing a diagnosis like that but the Lord Jesus would love us to think like that over time even if we can't do it immediately now verses 9 to 11 James gives us a worked example of what this kind of wisdom he's talking about looks like in practice have a look at that paragraph verse 9 let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich 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 it's a simple illustration you may have little money and yet

[28 : 49] James reminds us that in the Lord Jesus you have all of God's good riches or you may be wealthy in which case we're to see that our wealth and possessions they don't last and they're no more permanent than the daffodils which look so splendid in March but have now vanished and disappeared it means the Christian who has little can rejoice because in Christ they have much and the Christian who has much can rejoice because they're in Christ and therefore they have the one thing that will actually last now the illustration is about poverty and riches but it could equally well be about a whole range of other contrasting experiences of life illness and health loneliness and companionship happiness and sadness do you see how James wants to move us on from being stuck with our present experience and reality to instead having an eternal perspective and being shaped by eternal realities not double minded with a foot in both camps but having our circumstances transformed transformed by an eternal perspective the alternative of course verse 6 is to be unstable like a wave of the sea at the mercy of the wind without an anchor when the storms of life hit it's why the way we respond to trials when they come is so very important trials are a great opportunity which we can either take and grow in our faith and grow as disciples of the

Lord Jesus or we can reject them and become destabilized possibly even destroyed in our faith I'm sure all of us know Christians have experienced trials and they've grown through it they've matured and it's wonderful to see some in this room but I guess some of us may know others who actually in the face of trials have become unstable and doubting and drifted away from Jesus and if we know people like that it is a great act of love to seek to bring them back yes in testing times everything can seem out of control we don't know what's coming next or at least it feels as if things are out of control and we don't know what's coming next but the

Lord Jesus reassures us that what is coming is transformation at the end we will be a finished work of great worth and great beauty that should transform both the way in which we think about hardship as well as the way in which we pray about hardship let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him heavenly father we praise you that you are the great giver and we praise you that even when times are hard and life is difficult perhaps because we know the Lord Jesus or perhaps just because we live in a fallen world we praise you that you continue to give generously and we pray heavenly father might that shape the way in which we think about hardship and pray about hardship might it help as well and shape the way in which we seek to encourage and draw alongside others in the face of hardship and we ask it in Jesus name Amen