

Pure joy and wisdom in trials'

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] Okay, many of you will be familiar with this famous saying that has come out of the Reformation, and you know, some of you are getting really excited because you love the Reformation, yes, see some smiles there, and it's on the next slide which says, it is faith alone that saves, it's part of the five solace, if you know about those things, grace alone, in Christ alone, scripture alone, for God's glory alone, and of course, through faith alone, and anyone wearing a t-shirt today, the five solace t-shirt? Charlie, no? All got the tattoo to show for it? You can do that after church.

Now, for Calvin and Luther and others, the Reformers, that statement was also followed by another, which is that the faith that saves is not alone, right? It is faith alone that saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.

And that's because the Reformers knew that faith needed to produce fruit. It needed to be accompanied by change in a Christian's life, that of transformation of character and in conduct. And as we go through the book of James, that is what will largely be his focus. That faith that works is the faith that works itself out in our lives.

And so, while the Gospel of Grace is not explicitly spelled out in James, so for example, you will not read of the mention of the cross in James, this book is not solely about good works alone, because James then delves deeply into the reason for the good works, namely, it is to be motivated by faith, faith in Jesus, and shaped by the Gospel, the good news of Jesus.

[1:58] Now, if you've been with us over the last three weeks, you would have been going through the membership series with Andrew, where he explained that life is all about Christ. It revolves around him, is transformed by his work, that of the Gospel.

And as a result, we, the church, are to have the aim of presenting everyone mature in Christ. And individually, as church members, our call then is to serve Christ by serving one another.

And so, if you look at the book of James through this lens of what church and church membership is all about, this aim of serving one another, serving Christ by serving one another, is expressed in how we live, how we practice what we believe.

And it's not simply in what we do, but how we do it, and also why we do it. That is, as we practice our faith, the book of James gives us the underlying motivations that should drive us in the outworking of that faith.

Now, for the original recipients of James' letter in particular, their faith was worked out in very trying circumstances. And so, we read of this in his introduction as he speaks to them.

[3:21] In verse 1, he says, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, greetings. Now, James is generally considered to be Jesus' brother, one of the key elders, if not the head of the church in Jerusalem.

But as he was writing this letter, the church has been facing, as we read in Acts chapter 8, severe persecution. And as a result, many Christians found themselves scattered or driven out of Jerusalem, and therefore dispersed across the Roman Empire among the nations.

And so, James is actually addressing a church that was physically isolated and separated, facing many challenges.

And so, his first pastoral response is to this situation in verse 3. Now, even for us today, trials and adversities are a fact of life, aren't they?

And trials occur when life hasn't turned out as we planned, when our hopes are dashed, and as a result, hardship follows, whether it's physical, mental, or emotional.

[4:56] And such hardship could be external to us, like it was for the early Christians, through no fault of our own, you know, whether it's illness, or unemployment, or external conflict.

But hardship can also arise, or trials can also arise, when they are self-inflicted. The result of mistakes that we've made, right? Having unrealistic expectations, so that when they don't eventuate, we despair or become discouraged.

So, none of us are immune then to trials in life. But James' challenge for Christians is to consider it pure joy. Whenever we face trials of many kinds.

Now, pure joy. I want you to consider when in your life you've experienced pure joy, or seen pure joy. So, maybe you're a Calton supporter.

And for the first time in many years, they've made the finals. Pure joy. Until yesterday night, of course. Or it may be that you've proposed to your girlfriend, and she said, yes.

[6:10] Pure joy at the moment of that. Or some of you, either in the past or about to happen, checking your ATAR results in December online, and finding you have exceeded your wildest expectations.

The screams that come out of the bedroom when that happens. And I don't know whether this one is pure joy, but, you know, I went on to WhatsApp the other time. This Froget exchange.

Lashan says, let's go. Lashan's there covering himself. And Charlie's over there. Don't hide, guys. It's after dinner at church. Let's go to Froget.

Yay! I don't know who the love heart is, but we can find out. And then we have a, please. And then two more emojis.

I don't know who those are. We've all experienced this pure, spontaneous joy, haven't we? But pure joy, when you first hear bad news.

[7:10] Like a rejection for your job application. Or for others in your family, a cancer diagnosis.

Or when you hear someone is breaking up, or you yourself is going through a breakup. It's difficult, isn't it? It's almost impossible to have pure joy in those circumstances.

Because your heart sinks, fears arise, and you start worrying. Pure joy is the furthest thing from your mind. And yet, James is asking us to arrest that downward spiral when we hear bad news or experience difficult situations.

Trials with pure joy. To consider, which is what he says at the very start. To consider is to do something intentionally and deliberately.

It's something that does not come naturally. And in this case, what James wants them to do, us to do, is to exercise our minds to take control of our emotions.

[8:22] And James now goes on to show how this is to be done. By not looking at the trials themselves, but beyond it, to God's purpose for these trials.

And so, James goes on to explain. And if you're trying to fill in the blanks, this is the first part. So, why can we consider trials pure joy? Well, because, he says, you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

And secondly, perseverance, once it finishes its work, produces maturity. Being complete. Lacking nothing.

That is when God's intended goal for you is accomplished through the trials. So, James is saying that when trials come, don't focus entirely on the trial and the associated suffering.

Of course, it's going to be on your mind. But, look to God's end goal instead. Look beyond the trial to the end goal, which is maturity and completeness of character in your life.

[9:28] Now, many of our goals in life are very this life, isn't it? This present life, a fulfilling career, good health, happily married, financial security.

None of these things are wrong in themselves. They are blessings from God. But God actually has a much bigger goal for you, which we need to make our own. And that is maturity in Christ, to be like Him.

Which is the thing that matters most in being in God's kingdom. When we see that what God is doing through trials in our lives is this goal, then we need to focus on that rather than our own.

Which, in a trial, is to alleviate our suffering. Get rid of the problem. We need to focus on what God is doing, and that will enable us to have pure joy.

Joy rather than despair or resentment or anger with God. And here we have none other than Jesus, our Lord and Savior, as our perfect example.

[10:41] And so, we read in Hebrews 12, verse 2, that we encourage in the orange words, I'm reading from there, Let us run with perseverance the faith marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Those two words, perseverance and faith, the same ones as in James, are here as well. And then he goes on to say, You see, Jesus considered the joy that was set before him. And he saw beyond the suffering of the cross to the goal that God had for him, which was to, yes, save us, but also to be seated victorious at his right hand.

And with that, Christ rejoiced, considered it pure joy to go to the cross. Every trial that God allows in our life, no matter where it comes from, how it, you know, internal or externally generated, is an opportunity for all of us to grow in our faith, and therefore maturity in Christ.

We may say we believe in Jesus, but when trials come, that the genuineness of our faith is tested during those trials.

[12 : 15] You know, it's easy to sing the praises of, well, I think it's easy to sing the praises of Jesus on Sunday. We've just done that, two songs before this. But are we then prepared to put our trust in Jesus for the very things that we've just sung, on a Monday?

That is what the genuineness of our faith, the testing of that genuineness is all about. Because trusting God means we're going to be obedient even when it's hard.

It means saying, I'm not going to take a shortcut and sin to get what I want. That I'm going to do the right thing even when it's costly, because I can trust that God will still take care of you.

And that's why faith goes with perseverance, as we've seen. Because when we obey God, we need to stick with it. We need to persevere no matter how long it takes.

Right? We can't say to God, you know, God, I'm going to give you six months. But if you don't solve my problem by then, I'm going to take it into my own head.

[13 : 25] Or, if I don't get what I want, God, I'm going to find my own way. No. When we depend fully on God, then we need to wait on Him, don't we?

And we need to wait for His will to be done, to be fulfilled in our lives. And you know, sometimes God does make us wait. I'm sorry to have to tell you that.

He does make us wait, not because He wishes to prolong our suffering, but in order to grow our character. Because if you think about it, things like patience, forbearance, self-control, humility, all of these things take time, don't they?

And perseverance. You know, patience and not having to wait, they don't go together, do they? And God is not going to jeopardize these valuable virtues in our life by short-cutting, short-circuiting our maturity until His work is done.

I don't know about you, but it's a bit like teeth cleaning in a dentist's chair. You know, for me, whenever I go, it always takes too long.

[14 : 41] You know, the dentist, I don't know why, why does he have to hover over that same tooth for such a long time? You know, come on, just move along, get it done, quick.

But, you know, if the dentist rushes over it, then I'm not getting my money's worth for a start, which is very expensive. But secondly, it wouldn't be clean either, would it?

The plaque will still be there. The job's not done. And so the same thing happens with us, isn't it? God needs to complete His work in us.

And that takes time. And, you know, sometimes it may well be that the trial comes to an end, not when our situation changes, but actually when we've come to terms with it not being able to be changed.

Because we've actually found peace with what's happening with us. And if you think about it, there are some trials in life that are a bit like this.

[15 : 47] If you suffer from a lifelong illness or disability, if you're grieving over the loss of a loved one, and it won't apply to many of you, but if you're aging, these things don't go away.

Nobody gets younger. I hope you realize that. God's not going to remove aging from anyone's life. You'll get to that one day if you live long enough. And so that trial will not come to an end in that sense that it will go away, but it will come to an end when we learn to be at peace through such trials.

Or in James' language, find joy even in the midst of them. So that it's no longer a trial, isn't it? Because if you come to peace with a trial, it's no longer a trial, right?

You're able to live through it with peace and joy in your life. The testing of our faith then reaches completion in relation to that particular trial.

And in that sense, God has matured us, hasn't he? We have achieved, God has achieved what he wants to do in our lives. And so that brings us, I think, to the next point, which is that when we have

to go through trials and it doesn't seem to come to an end, what we need next is wisdom during trials.

[17:07] So yes, we're called to trust God during our trials, but the faith that God is asking of us is not a passive one. It's not to say, look, just sit back, you know, let go and let God.

Rather, it's an active faith, which, you know, constantly has to wrestle with doing good instead of bad, of fighting temptation rather than short-circuiting it and going to sin, of constantly fixing our eyes on Jesus and saying, I will trust him even when it's hard.

And so such situations calls for God's wisdom, which is what James now goes to in verses 5 to 8. And so he says, if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. Now, I think this instruction of asking God for wisdom is applicable in all situations, but in this context to which James was writing to the people, it was particularly important to do so in times of trial.

[18:25] And on the face of it, it's actually a very straightforward instruction. If you lack wisdom, just ask God without doubting. Why?

And here's the fill in the blanks the second time. Firstly, because God gives generously. He does it without finding fault. He's not going to quibble that you've asked the question the wrong way. He's not going to look at your weakness and say, I'm not going to give you an answer. You're not going to be able to do it. He's not going to say, oh, that's just a silly question. I'm not going to answer that. No. When we ask, God will give generously.

He will give us not just the wisdom we need, but more, actually. Not just what we ask, but more than what we ask. But we are to ask, and the condition is there, without doubting.

That is, we need to trust that He will answer, but also that when He answers, that this is the answer that is the right one for us, instead of rejecting it and trying to circumvent what God is telling us.

[19:26] Because secondly, if we doubt, what we're doing is betraying our trust in God. We're actually maligning His character. We're actually saying, Lord, yeah, thank you, but nah.

I don't believe you. I don't think you're good. I don't think that is good for me. I don't think that's wise for me. We're actually calling God's character into question when we doubt, aren't we?

And such a person, James says, is double-minded and should not expect to receive anything from God. And you know, we've seen such people in life, haven't we?

Not just about asking for God, but people who can't make decisions. They're always, you know, umming and ahing between two choices. They want this, but they also want that. And then ultimately, they get nothing, do they?

Because they're half-hearted. And that's the same with people who ask God and doubt. Because on the one hand, they're saying they want God's wisdom and help. But then on the other hand, when God answers, they're doubting that God's answer is a good one.

[20:27] And this is all the more so when, as I've said already, God has already promised to give us wisdom generously given. Right? Not withhold anything when we ask.

And the other reading in Proverbs chapter 8 shows us wisdom doing that. That wisdom is calling out to all and sundry to come. And wisdom will be given to them.

Right? And if you look through the rest of Proverbs, you will see that the call is to the young and the old, the wise and the simple-minded. It's not just the sages of the world.

It's not just those who have studied with a certain kind of philosopher. It's not just for people who are smart. Wisdom is given to all who ask, who come to her.

So, chapter 8, verse 4 in Proverbs, To you, O people, I call out, I raise my voice to all humanity, all mankind. So, come, she says, and I will give you understanding and knowledge.

[21:30] Verse 5, You who are simple, gain prudence. You who are foolish, set your hearts on it. Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say. I open my lips to speak what is right.

My mouth speak what is true, for my lips detest wickedness. This is a general call, isn't it? And anyone who comes seeking wisdom will find it.

And that's the same point that James has here. That if we turn to God and ask Him for wisdom, He will not withhold it from anyone. But we need to be mindful that this wisdom, sometimes we think

that what we ask God for is just answers to our problems.

But the wisdom that God gives us is not just answers as to what to do, but also insights as to why. Why have these things happened?

Why am I responding like that? What is going on in my own heart with my motives? You know, search me, O God, and see if my thoughts are pure.

[22:34] That's the wisdom that God gives us as we come to Him, to understand what's going on in our hearts and minds and also to understand what's going on in other people's hearts and minds.

And this is the kind of wisdom that actually strengthens our faith. The one that just gives you the answer is not really, in one sense, wise, isn't it? It's just answers. It's not true wisdom. Wisdom is when actually you gain insight into God's mind and as you do, you know who God is.

That will help you to trust God. It strengthens your faith. And so it's the reason why in Proverbs we hear the frame, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, isn't it?

Faith and wisdom actually go hand in hand. They reinforce each other. As you believe, God gives wisdom. As He gives you more wisdom, it helps you to believe. And James says the same thing, doesn't He?

Ask and believe. Right? Faith and wisdom will be given. And having this wisdom will then help you to trust God in your trials.

[23:41] Now, many people know the book of James to be one of a very practical book. And so what they think is that, oh, it's a book where there's a lot of rules, you know, do's and don'ts.

But, you know, I hope that as we've begun in this chapter, you see that James is actually more than a book with rules. Because as we see today, it's actually a book of wisdom, filled with wisdom and insight into practical living.

Wisdom that translates, wisdom that's not just theological knowledge, but wisdom that translates into how to live for God in this world. And if you take the two key takeaways from today, which are simply just the two sections or the two subsections in the outline, just look at them.

They say, the first one is to consider it pure joy during trials, right? That's the first takeaway. The second one is to ask for wisdom without doubting. And so, these are not pure commands to go and do something, is it?

But rather, they're instructions that deal with our motivations, what's going on in our hearts and minds. Consider it pure joy, right?

[24:53] Joy is a motivation. Ask without doubting, again, about attitude. And what James is saying is that if your heart is right, then the rest of your life follows.

That it's actually not hard to know and work out what to do. but the important thing is to get your motivations and your attitudes right in the first place. And so, friends, I think this is the key.

If you want to be successful in facing trials in life, the key is actually to be prepared and to get your heart right, to get your motivations right before adversity hits.

and you know, many people today, they expect that in order to be happy, you need to have a trouble-free life, right?

If only we didn't have any problems in our life, they think. Life would be so much better. And yeah, of course, that's true, but that's also unrealistic, isn't it? We know trials and suffering are just a part and parcel of life.

[26:03] Let me give you a few instances. If you ever want to do the right thing, which I hope you all do, and you want to stand up against injustice, which I know many young people want to do nowadays, well, you will face opposition by people who are unrighteous.

that in itself is a trial. If you are imperfect, which I hope you all can admit to, and you sin, but you desire to change your ways, the process of repentance is a trial.

It's not easy, is it, to repent or to change your ways. If you have friends or family you love dearly who are imperfect, just as you are, then your relationships with them will bring trials because they are imperfect and you are.

The fact alone that this world is fallen and brings with it the consequence of sin like disease and disaster means that there will be trials in our lives. And so, even if you have the best job in the world, which some of you want, you will have trials.

Marriage brings trials. As does singleness. You being a child in a family, you're going to be a trial to your parents and your parents you feel are a trial to you.

[27:34] And some of you are thinking about buying a home, you know, that's the great dream, isn't it? Australian dream. Good dream to have, a good goal to have. But let me tell you, owning a home brings trials because things break down, right?

And they always cost more to fix than you like. And, you know, not to mention when you do get the tradie to come, they do a job and then they leave more problems after they've left. And I know some of you want to serve God by going into ministry.

Well, expect your fair share of trials when you go in ministry as well. Right? And so sometimes we think, oh, okay, the answer then is to change our situation.

find another job, move churches, not that any of that applies to any of you, go find new friends, right? But God's goal in the first instant actually is not to free our lives from trials and therefore to change our situations immediately so that we're free of them.

Instead, his goal is maturity and that means finding joy in the midst of trials. pure joy. And so the key to resolve, the key to success in this is to resolve to have this approach that before the trials come, you have decided that when they do come, you will remember to consider it pure joy.

[29:03] It's not going to be a natural reaction, but if you remind yourself and have others remind you of it, then it will allow you to pause and think not how am I going to be freed from my trial, but what wisdom can I learn as I go through the trial.

Wisdom that is not just answers as to how to fix the problem, but wisdom as to insights about who God is, about who you are, that will then give joy.

So, let me repeat. The key is to say to yourselves before the trials come, I'm going to seek wisdom so that I can rejoice in trials and therefore allow God to make me mature rather than to say to God, I'm a Christian, get me out of here.

Now, as a pastor, I've sort of, it's one of the privileges really to spend time with saints and older saints, and what I've found is that the most mature Christians in the church are those who have actually learned this lesson, right?

They've learned to consider it pure joy when they face trials of many kinds because they know that what God is trying to do in their lives is to mature them, to make them ready for his kingdom.

[30:24] And so, what they seek is wisdom first rather than a change in their situation. And as a consequence, their faith cannot easily be shaken, right?

When you know that trials are God's way of making you mature because he loves you, you're not going to be shaken in your trust in him. What you're going to do instead is to rejoice that God is doing a good work in you to prepare you so that you are complete and lack nothing as you enter into his eternal kingdom, which is the new creation.

And so, friends, if you think about this, this ought to transform our prayers. And just think about when you need prayer, what do you normally pray for? Do you pray for a solution?

Or do you pray that God will give you insight so that you know what is his will and plan in what you are going through, right? It's not praying, Lord, give me this, give me that, get me out of this, get me out of that, but Lord, help me understand what you are doing in this world and in my life.

It's a very different kind of prayer, isn't it? And we always say, oh, look, when you're in trouble, pray to God, but actually, if you pray the right things, it's transformative, isn't it?

[31:44] If you're just praying, God, I can't stand it, get me out of here, you're not going to get the wisdom that you will get if instead you pray, Lord, show me that I might grow in joy in the midst of what you're putting me through.

Show me so that I might mature in Christ. Very different answer you will get, isn't it? Because God will definitely answer that prayer. If you ask him to take his suffering away, he may not answer that prayer, but if you ask him for wisdom to show you who he is and what you're like, he will definitely answer that prayer.

So, really two simple instructions from today. Face trials with pure joy and secondly, ask God for wisdom without doubting. The first one I can't help you with as you head out the door, you're going to have to face your trials come Monday and pray that God will give you joy.

But second, asking God for wisdom, we can do that right now. So let's do that as we finish. Father, thank you that you have saved us so that we may become like your son Jesus, mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Help us to face life with all its trials with pure joy, knowing that your work is to make us like your son, mature. Please, when we ask for wisdom, give it to us and help us not to doubt when you

answer.

[33:21] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.