

Prayer and Faith

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[0 : 00] The Old Testament reading comes from Psalm 25, verses 16 to 22.! Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress and take away my sins.

See how numerous are my enemies and how fiercely they hate me. Guard my life and rescue me. Do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you.

Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. In the book of James.

[1 : 09] James chapter 1, starting at verse 2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lack wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault. And it will be given to you. For 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. Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.

But the rich should take pride in their humiliation, since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant.

[2 : 25] Its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. And in the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me. For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it's full grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. This is the word of the Lord.

[3 : 42] Lord God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight.

As you speak to us, may we be attentive to do what is right and good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Joe is in trouble.

He's out of work. An unemployment benefit only just covers his rent. There's very little food in the house and his credit card is maxed out.

There's no way to put any of these problems off. It all seems hopeless. Joanna is also in trouble. She's had a really serious medical diagnosis. She's facing major surgery and that she may not survive. She's scared. And there's no one to look after a cat while she's in hospital.

[4 : 53] Last week, the Year 12 students started their exams. Well, those of us with a few more kilometres on our odometers might see that as not really a very big deal.

But for them, it feels like their whole future rides on those exams. It's really stressful. Now, imagine if someone, me, was to say to those people, Oh, count it all joy. You'd say, well, I was a bit insensitive and probably a little bit not making the connections. In today's passage, that's just what James does say. He starts by telling his Christian brothers and sisters to count it as joy, pure joy, when they face different kinds of troubles. [6 : 11] Now, I know that many of us have experienced trials.

All of us, to various extents, have experienced trials. Losses, deaths, illnesses, hard times, stress. I don't need to tell you about those things and I don't want to tell you about those things. But I want to talk about and explore through James what it might mean to count them as pure joy, as contradictory and as twisted as that might seem. But James actually helps us to know how to do that because in the very next verses, he tells us why we can count it as pure joy. Because we who believe in Jesus and know the goodness of God, when we face difficult times and bad things, it stretches our faith.

[7 : 34] It tests our faith, James says, to the point that it produces perseverance in us, which leads to maturity.

And then that becomes complete and we will lack nothing. And we know that that final lacking nothing only comes when we reach heaven, but we're on that journey. These trials are part of growing us towards that end. And it's actually counting it as joy. Not faking it. Not pretending. It's actually counting it as joy. It means making a real decision regarding the suffering to look at it in this way because we know of God and we know that God is able to use these hard times to grow us. It's like a joiner who clamps two bits of timber together until the glue sets. And then, of course, there's no need for the clamps anymore.

[9 : 02] The joint is strong. Well, God uses trials to clamp, to hold our faith together.

And sometimes, when it's set hard enough, the clamps can come off. But sometimes we need those clamps for life.

Paul, in his ministry, as powerful a minister as he was, had an affliction. He calls it his thorn in the flesh. In 2 Corinthians 12, verse 7, he says, Therefore, in order to keep me from being conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh. We don't know what that was. Probably it was something physical. A messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

[10 : 11] But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I'll boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

You see, Paul needed that trial, that thorn in the flesh, to keep his faith together. And God didn't take it away from him. Because he knew he needed it. Now, and it's not as though we are not to pray that suffering will go away, that the unemployed will find jobs, that the sick will get better.

In fact, later in this letter, in chapter 5 in James, James chapter 5, verse 14, it says, Is anyone among you sick? Well, let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with the oil in the name of the Lord.

We are to, when we are sick, when we're in trouble, pray, ask for others to pray for us.

[11 : 34] And then, it says, in verse 15, and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. But even in that, we're looking for God to be at work in us at a deeper level than mere physical relief.

Look at what verse 15 says. The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. The word for sick person is also the word for a weakened person.

Amen. The word making well is the word salvation. So the prayer offered in faith will make the weakened person saved.

The Lord will raise them up. It's talking about physical sickness, yes, and health, but it's also talking about spiritual health.

And we see that especially in the last words of the verse. If they've sinned, they will be forgiven. You see, God's in the business of curing us of sin.

[12:57] And while he's concerned with our physical bodies and how we suffer, he's also doing a deeper, eternal work in us. All the physical healing we ever experience will one day be undone when we die, won't it?

Even Lazarus, who was raised from the dead, died again. But the spiritual work in us that he's doing is lasting, even eternal.

eternal. And amazingly, one day we'll be given new, perfect, disease-free resurrection bodies to go with that as well.

So to count it pure joy is to look beyond the circumstances, beyond what's happening here and now to the long term, what the eternal result will be.

That is faith. Faith looks beyond what can be seen to the promises and character of God as Romans 8.28.

[14:17] We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purposes. But this is hard thought.

It's all very well to have this theory, to have that thought about God's good purposes and all that. But when our life is gone pear-shaped and things are not good, it can be really hard to rejoice. We can see the good of some trials like the exams, in fact we encourage our kids to do them because we know that that will be good for them in the longer term.

But other trials, we don't see how that's working. And it's hard for us to rejoice in those times.

I know that. And that's why James writes as he does in verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to you.

[15:34] You see, wisdom is making the connections between the realities of life and what we know of God. That's why the book of Proverbs tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning knowledge.

That's where you start to make the connection, fearing God in the first place. James tells us that when we ask for that sort of wisdom, to make that connection, he will give it to us.

Faith is being confident in God's goodness. Wisdom is us applying that confidence to our everyday life. When we have wisdom, we translate faith in the goodness of God to confidence that he's in charge in this current crisis that I'm in.

It's taking our faith from our heads to our hearts. And we can pray and ask God for the wisdom to make that connection and he will give it.

But you can't shortcut that process. That's what verses 6 to 8 are saying. We can only come to God through faith in Christ.

[17:09] Faith in his work on the cross to forgive our sins. That faith gives us a solid basis on which to build wisdom.

Remember, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We only come to the fear of the Lord through Christ. If you don't rest your belief on the saving work of Jesus, then asking God for help in your time of crisis has no basis.

It's just like wishful thinking, like saying good luck. You're like a bit of flotsam on the sea, tossed about, with no grounding in the fear of the Lord.

You are, in the words of James, a double-minded person, wanting the goodies from God with no relationship to him. It seems that the type of particular type of trial that the original readers of James were going through was some sort of financial hardship.

Verse 9 talks about those in humble circumstances, which is probably a fairly big understatement. They were poor people where what they would eat was their main concern.

[18:59] But we can rejoice in trials not only because they develop spiritual maturity in us, but because they have eternal value. We can rejoice even in our humble circumstances because the rich people of verse 10 will find out that what looks like their security, their wealth, will be shown to be no security at all.

If we take an eternal viewpoint, they and we are like wild flowers in the desert.

When it rains, they come up for a little while and then wither and they are gone. Wealth is no security. security is found in God.

And that's what the contrast is in verse 12. The one who perseveres under trials, the one who has faith that has been reinforced by trials, will receive the crown of life.

that reward in heaven. So when we have faith, a relationship with God which has its foundation in the completed work of Jesus, our minds and our hearts are oriented to an eternal future.

[20 : 40] If our faith is only focused on the present, it can't deal with any of the trials in our lives. Perseverance and endurance mean nothing if all we have is here and now.

But we do have a sure and certain hope through Christ. So those qualities of perseverance and endurance make the world of difference and give us hope and even joy.

It's like this diagram and it's in the notes that you may have been given when you came in. Trials as they work through faith produce perseverance, maturity and eventually to a crown of life.

We can pray that God will give us this perspective in the hard things of our lives. There are two things, two ways to understand who God is and what he's doing when we suffer.

Those are outlined in verses 13 to 15 and then again 16 to 18. The first of these in 13 to 15 is saying things are bad and God is at fault.

[22 : 04] God is tempting me. God is bringing this on me. God is bad to me. He has done so much awful things to me.

Trials become temptations when we blame God rather than rejoicing in his good purposes. And so the pattern described in James 1 13 to 15 becomes this one, the downhill slope.

Trials with when our evil desires are at work become temptations, become sin and lead to death. we need to pray that we will discern God's purposes, that we will discern God, we will know that God is good, we will not blame God but we will look to him because you see that's the other way that James, the other perspective on life that James describes, verse 16.

Don't be deceived. don't think that way that God is the one tempting you but rather cling to what you know of God.

[23 : 30] Where the first option said things are bad and God is at fault, the second option, the second way of viewing it saying things are bad but God is good.

God is good and that doesn't change. He doesn't change. Just because our circumstances look like they've taken a turn for the worst, that's not the case with God.

He made the sun and the moon and the stars what James calls the heavenly lights. So it's ridiculous to think of him changing like a shifting shadow.

God is changing like a he doesn't change. And more than that, as verse 18 says, his goodness is seen in the fact that he's chosen to give us life through the gospel, a birth through the word of truth. And his purposes are that we might be a foremost example of first fruits of his creation. God wants us to be on that upward slope of faith and his goal is for us that crown of life.

[25 : 02] That is a good God. And he can even use all of the horrible and painful and unpleasant things that come into our lives to get us there.

that is a powerful God as well. And we need to pray for this perspective, this understanding of what God is doing, even in our hardest times.

In the book of James, there are a number of different themes that sort of just, it's like a tumble dry and they keep coming round and round, the different themes. And the theme of prayer comes around again in James 4.

James 4 verses 1 to 3, James talks about the problems that people get into when they mishandle prayer. What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but you do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

[26 : 15] You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

In other words, they're trying to get themselves further along down the downward path governed by evil desires through prayer.

Either you don't pray or you pray out of the wrong motives, the motive of your evil desires, so you're going the wrong way. How foolish.

as we've seen earlier at the end of the book in chapter five, James turns again to prayer and it seems like it's kind of like he's bookending his letter with the theme of prayer in the face of trials. chapter one he talks about it, chapter five he talks about it. In fact, when I mentioned to somebody that I was speaking on prayer from the book of James, they said, oh, you're talking about chapter five then.

[27 : 43] But in chapter five verse 13, he's reemphasizing what we've already read in chapter one. Is anyone among you in trouble?

Let them pray. We've seen that in chapter one. But he extends it now. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Then, is anyone sick?

Let them call the elders to pray over them. The mature Christians to help them pray. But his point is pray and keep on praying don't don't let the quantity of your prayer be determined by your circumstances.

Only praying when you're in trouble or only praying at other times. Whether we're in trouble or happy or somewhere in between, pray.

Bring it to God. Because, as he says in verse 16, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

[29 : 07] It works. God chooses to act when we pray. pray. And that's not magical.

It's not a formula that we manipulate God through. It's actually God at work choosing to use us through prayer.

And that's his point when he goes on in verse chapter 5 verses 17 to 18. when he talks about Elijah. Elijah was a human being, even as we are.

He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain in the land for three and a half years.

Again, he prayed, and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced.

You see, James is saying, Elijah was an ordinary person, just like us. He had his human weaknesses, like us.

[30 : 06] but he prayed earnestly with faith and God withheld rain. And he prayed again and it rained. It was God's intention to bring drought at that time.

And in fact, Elijah prayed the way he prayed at God's direction. But God chose to involve Elijah in the things that God was doing.

God used the prayer of Elijah and acted through it. And the result?

Faith. Elijah's faith was increased, that of his contemporaries, some of them, and ours.

all built because of Elijah's prayer in faith and God's action through it.

[31 : 15] God uses prayer to increase our faith. prayer to So when I look at all those things, what am I going to do?

Can I look at the bad things that are going on in my life, the terrible things, and the minor irritations, and count them all joy?

can I see these unwanted things that God is working in me, that in these unwanted things God is working in me to build maturity through perseverance as part of my journey to that crown of life?

And when I can't do that, when it's too hard, when the world, other people, and even my own body break my heart, can I turn to God in prayer, asking him for the wisdom to recognize his goodness, despite my circumstance, even while praying for the circumstance to change, of course.

Do I believe deep in my being, unshakably and absolutely, that God is good? Whether I'm enjoying good times or enduring tough times, do I know deep inside me that God is good?

[33 : 07] God is God is God is God is In Nigeria, in the church, we would often say, that the preacher would often say, God is good, and the congregation would all say, all the time.

And then the preacher would say, and all the time? God is God is good. God is good. Well, it's a cute little sort of liturgy to have, but the point is, it's a reaction that we need to cultivate, to always know that all the time, God is good.

We don't need to doubt that. Is that something I need to pray to be seeped into my soul?

And when we ask for that sort of wisdom, we are assured, by James 1.5, that God will give us that sort of wisdom.

wisdom. Let us be praying. And are we really going to pray?

[34 : 37] It's all very well talking about prayer, but do we really pray? What habits can I cultivate to actually get me to pray and keep on praying?

I know I'm weak and easily distracted. I'm a world-class procrastinator with a hundred excuses.

Having someone that I can pray with and be accountable to for my prayer life really helps.

Maybe it can help you too. Find someone that pray. Maybe I also need to pray that I will be stimulated to pray more.

Let's do that now. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we pray that you will help us. Help us in our weakness, help us in our waywardness.

Help us to recognize you as the good God in all circumstances, no matter what it is. Help us to have the reflex of turning to you in prayer at all times, whether we are in good times or bad, and may we know your goodness and grace in everything.

[36 : 15] for we pray in the name of Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.