

Persevering through Trials

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] And we at six o'clock are beginning a new series looking through the book of James in the Bible. And so it'd be great if you had your Bibles open at that reading that Gina just read for us.

And why don't I start, though, by praying. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the word of your gospel, which has changed the lives of many here tonight.

As we heard from Juan and Dan themselves. And Father, we thank you that your word continues to change our lives. For your spirit works through your word to change us.

And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to understand your word this night. And that we might live, change lives because of it. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, when it comes to vegetables, we all have one vegetable that we just don't like. You know the one I mean? And if we have to eat it, it's a real trial for us.

[1 : 04] When I was younger, it was the vegetable peas. You know those green balls? Hated peas. I remember gagging on them one night when I was forced to eat them. And from that time on, whenever I had to eat peas, it was an incredible trial.

In fact, I tried to get out of eating peas. I would make a deal with my parents. If I don't have to eat my peas, I will do the dishes for the rest of the week. Or I would say, can I go to the toilet?

And then flush. Try and get rid of them that way. Or I would just, being a child, throw a tantrum and grumble loudly. I like peas now. But when I was younger, it was a real trial for me.

Of course, there are much more serious trials and hardships in life than that, aren't there? A good friend of mine was 13 years old when he and his family went on a trip down to the Snowys.

They all slept in their van that night because it was cheaper. The next morning, they all woke up except his mother. She never woke up. I'm still not sure what caused her death.

[2 : 05] But there is the family in their van, all woken up, but their mother died. And I remember it being a huge tragedy and an intense trial for that family. And we all face trials of various kinds, though, don't we?

I've given you one extreme to the other. But we all face trials, difficult times, whether it's health issues or oppression, the death of a loved one, even.

And tonight, as we begin this series in the book of James, which for many Christians is a favorite book because it has so much practical advice to give us. It fits with our focus this year at Holy Trinity on discipleship and training.

It's full of how to live as disciples of Christ. But the people James writes to are people who are undergoing trials. Who are they? Well, verse 1 tells us, if you've got your Bibles there, verse 1, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations.

Here he writes, to 12 tribes scattered among the nations. And it's a reference that the Jews would have known well. They were one of the 12 tribes, you see.

[3 : 16] And that phrase, 12 tribes scattered among the nations, that's what they used to be when they were in exile. They were the 12 tribes scattered among Babylon and Assyria and the like, among the nations.

And so it seems that James writes to Jewish Christians in particular who have been forced out of Jerusalem, perhaps because of famine or perhaps because of persecution. And now they are living among the nations.

And this would make sense of their poverty and exploitation by the rich. So if you've got your Bibles there, have a look at chapter 2, verse 6, for example, just on the other side of the page.

Chapter 2, verse 6. Bottom left-hand corner of page 1217. He says, But you have dishonoured the poor by showing favouritism to the rich.

And then he says, Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

[4 : 17] And so we get a hint here of the kind of suffering they're undergoing. Exploitation, for example. The suffering comes up again in chapter 5, actually. So just flick over the page to chapter 5.

Just one page turn. Chapter 5. Pick it up at verse 7. He's just condemned the rich. In verses 1 to 6.

And then he says, Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. Will you too be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near?

Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The judge is standing at the door. Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

And so it's quite clear from the letter of James, both the beginning and the end and even the middle, that these people know suffering. They're going through trials, one of which seems to be exploitation by the rich.

[5 : 21] And so how are they to endure trials? Come back to chapter 1. How are they to endure trials? Well, by practicing the four Ps. There's an outline in your bulletin.

And in honour of my green Ps, each point starts with the letter P. And the first one is pure joy. So point 1, verse 2.

James says, it writes, Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Now when you first read that, you kind of think, has James lost the plot?

What do you mean, consider it pure joy when you face trials? I mean, trials are not joyful, are they? That's why we call them trials. But notice he's not saying suffering is a good thing.

It is a bad thing. And nor is he saying that we had to feel only joy. It is right to grieve and so on. Rather, James says, there is something about trials that is worth being joyful about.

[6 : 27] There is something about trials that we had to consider or count as real joy. So what is this joyful part of trials? Well, it's what they produce. So verse 3 and 4, he says, Because you know that the testing of your faith, or the trials, the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James is saying that we are to rejoice, not in the trial itself, but the Christian maturity that it produces.

It's kind of like being pregnant, from what I understand, not that I've ever been pregnant. But I've lived with a pregnant woman three times, the same woman, just for the record.

And from what I saw, the pregnancy, and certainly the labour, was a trial. It was suffering. You don't rejoice in that pain, but you do rejoice in what the pain is producing, your child.

And so also with trials. But how do trials produce Christian maturity? Well, verse 3 and 4 has told us. But for the visual learners amongst us, on the next slide, let me show you with a flow chart.

[7 : 40] He says, Count trials with joy. Why? Well, because they test our faith. And that testing, next one, develops perseverance, the next one, which leads to Christian maturity.

See, trials test our faith. They force us to exercise our trust in God. When times are tough, we are forced to choose whether we will trust God, have faith in God, or whether we will give up.

We must exercise our trust in him. And that then, that exercising of our faith develops perseverance. It's strengthened our faith, develops our faith.

And as it does, then the last one, it grows us in Christian maturity. That's how it works. And so to use another example, trials are like the gym. Most people I know have this love-hate relationship with the gym.

I saw this set of New Year's resolutions on the next slide. At 2012, I will go to the gym five days a week. 13, I will go to the gym two days a week. 2014, I will drive past the gym at least one day a week this year.

[8 : 42] People have this kind of love-hate relationship with the gym, don't they? They hate it because it means hard work and so they don't always go. But when they do, they love it because it forces them to exercise their bodies and it gets them in due time fit, strong.

And trials are like that. They are not pleasant, they are painful, but they force us to exercise our faith and grow it fit and strong and in the end, mature like Christ.

And it works. I mean, when do you pray the most? Or when are you forced to trust God the most? Is it during easy times in life?

Or is it during difficult times in life? You see, trials and suffering force us to exercise our faith and trust God. And the more we do, the stronger our faith becomes.

The more mature we get, the more like Jesus we grow. And that, that is worth being joyful about. Not the pain of the trial itself, but what it produces.

[9 : 48] Now, of course, it's not always easy in the middle of a trial to see things from God's perspective and to consider it pure joy. And so we come to our second P, pray.

We ought to pray for wisdom, says James, that we might see things, including trials, from God's perspective. That's the point two, verse five. 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, he says.

As you know, being wise is not about being smart. Rather, it's about living well in God's world. It's about seeing things from God's perspective.

And so we're to ask or pray for wisdom, that we might see how God uses trials for our good, and so rejoice in that. And notice, God is keen to give us this wisdom, it says.

It says he gives us generously without finding fault. He doesn't see if we deserve it first and then give it to us, but he gives generously. He gives us wisdom by his word or through godly people, perhaps even direct understanding.

[11 : 01] But, says James, when we ask, we must not doubt, but trust. See verse 6 to 8? 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. James says here that we must believe or trust.

It's the same word. We're to trust God and not doubt. Now, James doesn't mean we can't have any doubt whatsoever. When we go through trials, it's okay to ask God, what are you doing?

Rather, what James is against is the type of doubting where you doubt God's wisdom so much so that you look for wisdom elsewhere. You chase after some of the world's wisdom as well.

You're double-minded. You kind of want to each way bet a bit of the God's wisdom, but I don't really trust God's wisdom, so I'm going to have a bit of the world's wisdom as well. I'll check my horoscope or something like that.

[12 : 07] But when you do that, you're like a wave blown to and fro between God and the world. And in the end, you're double-minded, says James. Instead of seeking God's wisdom and trusting him that he knows best, we want to be the world's wisdom as well.

James says, if you're like that, then you're not going to get it. You're not going to get God's wisdom. I mean, imagine employing this kind of tactic when you want someone to marry you.

Okay? So imagine, my wife's name is Michelle. Imagine if I asked Michelle to marry me, but because I wasn't sure about her, I also asked Melissa as well. You know, just each way bet kind of to be on the safe side.

I'd be clobbered by both, wouldn't I? It doesn't work. Nor does it work when it comes to asking God for wisdom. Instead, when we pray, we must trust God alone. To give us the right understanding.

To give us the right wisdom. And when it comes to trials, that we might see them from his perspective. But not just trials, we're also to pray that we might see our own position in life from God's perspective.

[13 : 13] And even take pride in it. Which brings us to point three, the third P, verses nine to eleven. He says, 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 wildflower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant. Its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed.

In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. Here, James gives us some of God's wisdom on wealth. Now, it may look like he's just started a new topic.

But remember one of the trials that James' readers were facing? They were experiencing oppression from the rich people. And so James says in verse nine, brothers and sisters, you who are in humble circumstances, you who are physically poor, remember.

In fact, even take pride in, literally, boast in. Rejoice in your high position, he says. You know, see your real position in life is what he's saying.

[14 : 20] But what is this high position? Well, it's the position of being one of God's chosen people, which makes us spiritually rich. And just look over the page for a moment to chapter two, verse five.

Chapter two, verse five. You don't have to flick any pages, just on the right-hand side. Chapter two, verse five. This is what James says here. He says, Listen, my dear brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him.

You see, Christians are rich. We are God's treasured people, heirs to God's kingdom. Last month, there was a bit of hype around Australia when Prince William and Duchess Kate and young Prince George came to Australia.

On the next slide, there they are. But why all the hype? Well, because they're royalty, I take it. William and then George are heirs to the British Empire.

They will inherit the throne and the kingdom. Now, that's a pretty high position, isn't it? But the Bible tells us that we are heirs of God's empire.

[15 : 32] We will inherit God's throne and God's kingdom and rule with Christ in it. That's an extraordinarily high position, is it not?

And so, James says, you believers, remember your position in life and take pride in it, boast, rejoice in your high position, even though in this life you may be in humble circumstances.

What's more, remember the destiny of those rich unbelievers. They may be rich in this life, but they will soon pass away, as we heard in our first Bible reading from Psalm 37. They will pass away and face judgment.

You see, James' point is that there will be a reversal. The rich who seem to have it all now will fade away from this life and face judgment in the next unless they cling to Christ.

But the believers who are in humble circumstances in this life will be exalted in the next, inherit God's kingdom. And we are to remember that. We are to remember our real position in life as heirs of God's kingdom, those who will inherit it.

[16 : 36] And we are to take pride and rejoice in that. Indeed, it's meant to help us persevere, which is our fourth P, verse 12. Verse 12.

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.

James says here that we are to persevere remembering the prize, remembering that we will inherit God's kingdom, remembering we will receive this crown of life. I remember when I was in year 12, doing the equivalent of the VCE, the thing that helped me get through all that horrible study and exams was a three-month holiday at the end.

Gee, that was good. Nothing hanging over you, no assignments, no homework, in fact, no more school. Not that school was bad, school's great, you know, if you're at school, keep going.

But this light at the end of the tunnel was brilliant. It was the prize that helped me persevere. But a three-month holiday is nothing compared to the crown of life that awaits each person who trusts in Jesus.

[17 : 54] As Paul writes on the next slide from Romans chapter 8, he says, I consider that our present sufferings, our trials, are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And Paul knew what it was to suffer. He knew hard and severe trials. And if those trials, those severe trials are nothing to him compared to that glory, then how great must that glory be to eclipse all that suffering?

So says James, persevere and God will bless your socks off. It will be more than worth it on that last day for those, though, who believe in Jesus.

And so he's saying persevere with the crown in sight, but also persevere with God's goodness in mind. So verse 13, 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 desires and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.

[19 : 09] You see, when we face trials or suffering in life, we almost always face temptation as well. In fact, it's the same word in the Greek language that the New Testament was written in.

You see, when there are trials, we're often tempted to doubt God's goodness. We're tempted to think, how can God let that happen to me? We're tempted to blame God and give up on him, saying, this is your fault for putting me through this.

I'm out of here. But James says, first of all, God does not tempt people to fall. The temptation comes from our own evil desires to put comfort above God.

Our desire to be lazy instead of working hard at persevering. Our desire to blame God rather than trust God. For my friend who lost his mother at the Snowys, he was tempted to walk away from God.

At one point, he told me that he even wanted to kill God for taking his mother. He didn't want to think about whether God had a plan or a reason or the fact that because of sin, then our world is fallen and there is death and disease because of sin.

[20 : 20] Instead, it was easier to blame God and want to kill God. Now, at one level, this is understandable. I remember seeing how severe his pain was. He was a young teenager and his mother was the only one who seemed to understand him and now she was gone.

It's an incredibly hard trial. But, says James, persevere through it, remembering, first of all, that God does not tempt us that we might fall, but he does test us that we might grow more like Jesus.

And that's a good thing. In fact, we're to remember that God not only does it test us, but instead he gives us good gifts. See verses 16 to 18. He says, Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of 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 has created.

You see, God cannot tempt us because God only gives us good gifts. And we know he gives good gifts because of verse 18. It says, God has given us new birth into his family through the word of the gospel.

[21 : 36] We've heard about it tonight, haven't we? You see, the gospel message says that God gave his one and only son, Jesus, to die for us, to take our punishment in our place for our sin.

It says, if we simply believe in Jesus, we too can be rich in faith and inherit God's kingdom. If we believe in Jesus, we too can have a crown of life waiting for us.

If we believe in Jesus, we can join God's family and have forgiveness and hope and comfort and one another as a Christian family. And we can have God who will never leave us nor forsake us.

This is the type of God we have if we believe in Jesus. And so I need to ask you at this point, do you? Do you believe in Jesus? We've got lots of visitors here tonight, which is terrific.

But the most important thing to get out of tonight is, do I believe in Jesus? We've heard from both Dan and Juan that they do believe. And because of that, God is their heavenly father who only gives good gifts.

[22 : 41] And he's not a God who tempts us to fall. A little while later, my friend who lost his mother wanted to be baptized too, actually, at our church.

And before his baptism, he gave a testimony, just like we've heard tonight. And as he spoke about how God worked in his life, he spoke about how he was angry with God for some time and how he had to choose whether he would continue trusting God or whether he'd walk away from God.

And he said, well, as you can see, I've decided to keep trusting God. And although I still don't know why my mum had to die, I do know a glimpse of the pain God must have felt when he gave his son for me.

And he was baptized. And we rejoiced. You see, the excruciating trial forced him to choose. It forced him to trust. Forced him to exercise his faith.

Pray lots, sometimes even shouting at God, other times pleading for wisdom. And as a result, it grew his faith stronger. It made him more mature, such that he could even trust God without understanding why his mother died.

[23 : 49] And he could even appreciate God's own sacrifice of his son even more. And he persevered, you see. And to this day, he continues to trust in Jesus, looking forward to that crown of life and seeing his mother again.

James tells us tonight that when we face trials of many kinds, then remember the four Ps. Pure joy at what the trial is producing. Pray for wisdom to see from God's perspective.

Pride or rejoice in our high position as heirs of God's kingdom. And persevere with the crown of life in sight and God's goodness in mind.

In other words, James is telling us tonight to persevere through trials because it will be worth it. Let's pray. Amen.

Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this letter of James. We thank you that it is real, that it acknowledges that this life in a fallen world, this side of heaven, will have trials of many kinds.

[24 : 59] We will suffer in various ways. But Father, help us to remember your wisdom on the matter. help us to remember what the trials are producing. Help us to remember our high position in life.

Help us to pray for wisdom to see these things from your perspective. And so persevere, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.