

Persevering through trials

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[0 : 00] Zachary, thank you. So our question this morning, how do you connect the trials and troubles! of life with God? Here with James 1 open in front of us. There's a book I read a while back! called *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, which was not a very happy read. It's a story about a man and his son who struggled for survival in a tough world. And at one point they're camped out in a small wood.

This is what happens. The man woke before dawn and he watched the grey day break slowly. He rose while the boy slept and pulled on his shoes and wrapped in his blanket he walked out through the trees. He descended into a cleft in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. And then he just knelt in the ashes and he raised his head to the paling day and he whispered, are you there? Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Do you have a heart? Damn you eternally, do you have a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God, as he prayed. How do you connect the trials and troubles of your life with the God who is there?

This short series in James 1 is all about trials and temptations and began last Sunday, I think, and Naomi picked this up in her prayers, with a bang of super, super significant teaching.

Last Sunday we looked at verses 2 to 4 which said this, just look with me again. 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. Like we could spend time on those verses again. That is such a radical way to see our lives, do you not think? Instead of thinking hard things in our lives are always bad for us, instead of thinking God is not there or doesn't care, instead of becoming disappointed with God or even bitter towards God, damn you and turning away, James says, God says to us here, consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds. How could I? Because in these verses last Sunday, in and through the hardships that we face,

[2 : 42] God has a loving purpose for those who love him. And his purpose for our lives is not to wrap us up and pamper us like babies with a cash-rich, sickness-free, shiny life of no worries. That's not God's plan for us.

His purpose, verse 4, is to grow us into mature, complete human beings. That's what he's aiming at. To grow us into Christian men and women whose faith is tested and refined in the furnace of troubles, and who in our weakness fall on our knees and pray and trust our God and persevere, choosing to live with him, live for him in the tough times with a deeper, pure, battling loyalty, until the day when we become mature.

Until the day actually that we become like the Lord Jesus Christ, who himself, deeply loved by his Father, faced trials of poverty and exhaustion and persecution and pain.

And this Jesus persevered himself through tears and then made it through death to life. And Jesus today in heaven is a battle-scarred, tested, faithful man.

He's a mature, holy, obedient man, Jesus Christ. He is complete and glorious. And God's perfect plan for each of us is to make us one day mature and complete like the perfect man.

[4 : 20] And our God will do that as he takes us and refines and deepens the faith that we have through the trials that we face.

That was just verses 2 to 4 last Sunday morning. Very, very big things to say and maybe a lifetime to digest. I don't know if over this past week you've been able to start to connect that teaching with your own life.

We said last week that in a church like ours there is all sorts of stuff going on for us. Some that I know about, some that you know about, some that's hidden. Amongst us there is ill health, disability, having little money, ageing, being hurt by others because you're a Christian.

Tough bereavement. We face trials of loneliness or a tough marriage or wanting a relationship or having a hard time bringing up the kids or having a hard time because you are childless. Or maybe a seemingly dead-end career at the moment or what feels like a dead-end life. And reading verses 2 to 4, I guess you might be able to start to think that God could work in us through the trials we face.

[5 : 43] Like it sounds hard, but it is what God says. But actually living in the light of this is something else. So tough.

When you're bang in the middle of tough things and it hurts and it's hard to see through the mess and strain and stress and make any sense of it all sometimes. So hard actually to see clearly and to actually trust him.

Isn't it? And if that's true for us, as it is for me, we're now meant to come to verse 5 onwards. As James goes on to tell us something that we should do in the middle of hard times when we're finding it tough. And verses 5 to 12 this morning, here's a very straightforward first and main thing for today.

Where James says in the middle of trials, straightforwardly, ask God for wisdom. Let me read verses 4 to 8 and just see how this flows forward.

[6 : 50] Let perseverance finish its work, says James, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 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 about 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. We'll get to that in a moment. But James is saying, very straightforwardly, in the middle of trials, pray and ask God for wisdom. Do not struggle on by yourself. Pray. I think it's striking here in these verses, James doesn't say pray for everything to be sorted out.

It doesn't say pray for all your troubles to go away. Like it's not deadly wrong to pray for more money or a more interesting job or for God to give you a spouse or a baby.

[8 : 01] It's not wrong to pray for relief from hardship or pain. But it is wrong to think that God's best is to give us a completely trouble-free life.

Total health, tons of wealth, the best family, a perfect job, completely protected from any trouble. Don't make that the focus of your prayers, James says. Just pause on this.

There are churches around the place who will say to you, pray in faith and claim a trouble-free life for yourself. God's best. No, no, no.

God's best plan is for our maturing through trials. So pray. And ask him, verse 5, for wisdom.

What is that? Wisdom here is to be able to start to see life from God's angle. It's being able to see in the nitty-gritty of life something of his perspective, his will.

[9 : 16] And we pray, Heavenly Father, I'm hurting. Would you help me see something of your purposes, your kindness in my life?

I want to keep going. I want to grow. I want to become more like Jesus. Please help me see something of what you are doing in my life through this trial. Please give me wisdom.

Could we pray like that? It would be a dangerous prayer to pray in a sense. Would we pray something like that? And verses 5 to 8 then go on now with more about prayer.

Now just check this out. When we ask our Father for help in the middle of a hard time, now here in these verses, who we ask and how we ask. Firstly, who do you ask in?

Who are we praying to? Wonderfully, we are praying to the single-minded giver. Look, verse 5. 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.

[10 : 23] Isn't that a wonderful verse? It's a beautiful description to urge us to pray when life is tough. He is a close and giving God. He is like a fountain of giving goodness to those whom he loves.

The word generously here means something like with a single eye, with single intent. Do you know what it's like when you're having a conversation with someone and they're half looking past you, or they're half listening, or you know that they're half thinking of the next thing that they're going to do.

They're not giving you their full attention. Our Father is completely and totally focused on you as you pray, and completely and totally focused on giving good things to those who ask him, like he's got nothing else in the world to do but to give and give to you.

Do you think of him like that? He is like that. And when you're crying on the sofa and you blurt out, help me Lord, just help me, he doesn't pick holes in you.

How stupid you've been. What a loser you are. Don't you understand? He's not like that. He gives generously to all who ask without finding fault.

[11:43] Won't pick holes in you as you pray to him. Because the wisdom we need, he will give us in order to see and keep going in trouble.

But when we pray to him, it also matters how we ask. We're meant to ask him, this single-minded generous God, with single-minded faith in him.

And that is verses 6 to 8. Look at this. 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. When life is tough and we pray, says here we must believe and not doubt, verse 6.

That is, pray as a believer. Loyal and devoted to him. Like committed to going his way in life.

Doubting here is like when you, your life, you waver between two loyalties.

[12:55] You're like the swell of the sea, changing shape with the wind. You're kind of committed to God. But when hard times come, you change, you're shaped a bit. You're blown by the desires of your heart.

You're not sure you want to live for him anymore. In verse 8, James says, such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. I should have thought of a more recent example.

Augustine was a man who, 1500 years ago, prayed famously, Lord, Lord, help me be sexually pure, but not yet. That's like praying, and yet, I mean, that's a very honest thing to say.

Not straightforward and trusting your God. Praying and asking, but his heart wasn't in it, very obviously. That is double-mindedness.

Wavering and hedging your bets. I will trust in you, but, and James is saying, if we pray like that, don't expect to receive anything from the Lord. Let me just draw this first bit together.

[14:03] I think these verses are, at the same time, pretty searing and get to us, and at the same time, I'm meant to draw us in and go, I will pray. In the middle of mess and tough stuff, as we struggle to see how God might work through our troubles, pray.

Pray. Ask him for wisdom, this single-minded, generous, giving God. Don't tinker with it. We mustn't tinker with him. Half committed to going his way, double-mindedly.

Because the promise in verse 5 is, wisdom will be given to us. He will help us. He will help us see. I'm going to just apply this very simply.

I'll kind of say the same thing again, but from a different angle. Some of us today, in our church, will be very conscious of a very obvious trial in our lives. And maybe you can identify that, a tough relationship, or a situation that you're in, or a long-term disappointment.

And when tough things come into our lives, they can make us feel tired, angry, low, far from God. Trials can be like a dark cloud, pressing on us, kind of misty and confusing.

[15:23] You can't make sense of it. And when life is tough, you can be tempted even to blame God in some way. What James commands here isn't complicated.

Like, we can remember this and go home with this. What are we meant to do? Pray. Or find someone here today, after the service, and say, can we pray, will you pray together with me? Will you pray for me about this? Or later this evening, kneel beside your bed, and pray to your father.

Don't have to use these words. My father, I trust in you. I entrust my life into your hands. I am struggling, and life is hard, but I'm not going to turn anywhere else.

I want your wisdom. I need that. I want your will for my life right now. I want to be able to see, just a little bit, how you might change me through this hardship.

[16:24] I want to grow in faith in you, and joy. Would you please help me, Father? In Jesus' name. Amen. That's a prayer. It's a straight prayer. And then see if he doesn't give us what we want.

What we're talking about here is Christian faith. Like, this is the Christian life. In the middle of trials, don't grin and bear it, and don't fall into despair.

Ask your generous father for wisdom and help. I kind of feel I've not said very much. It's so important, this. James, by the way, is a very, very practical, hands-on letter.

We're not doing all of James through this summer. But notice now what happens. That, a first thing. Ask God for wisdom. Now, in verses 9 to 11, just following on, comes what seems to me to be concrete examples of the kind of wisdom that God gives to those who ask him.

So we've talked a bit. We've mentioned persecution, illness, bereavement, a dead-end career, a challenging relationship, and so on. The two trials in view in verses 9 to 11 are being poor and being rich.

[17 : 45] I wonder if either of those are a trial for you. I mean, likely you wouldn't guess that being rich is a trial and a difficulty. It'd be quite nice to have more money. Where's the hardship there?

But Jesus says, of course, it's very, very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. So now, in our sermon this morning, this passage, two trials that you and I may face in our lives and wisdom from God to keep going and growing as a Christian.

Ready? Okay, verses 9 to 11. 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, and so on.

So first off, verse 9, where James is talking to believers in humble circumstances. This is more obvious. Being poor is a trial.

When you have to manage on very little, and you know the constant stress of what you can and can't afford. When you are poor, your health can suffer more than others.

[18 : 59] Your housing not adequate. You can feel ashamed. You're not able to give your family what you want. That is a trial. It can really press on you and mess you up as a Christian.

When you are poorer than others around you, it is so tempting to be envious and self-pitying and bitter. God, that's not fair. But James says that through the trial of being poor, you can grow.

You can have a deeper, stronger faith in God. You can become more like Jesus Christ. How would that work? Give me wisdom, Father. I want to know.

So here's verse 9, God-given wisdom. Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. What do you think of that?

This is a proper, God's eye, wise view of life. That is, instead of looking down, ashamed of your humble circumstances, you can boast in your riches, your high position.

[20 : 11] Not cash in the bank, but the unfading riches of being a child of the living God. James will say over the page in chapter 2, verse 5, 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?

So when as a Christian you are struggling to make ends meet, don't give up. Instead, be wise and reckon your life in the light of eternity, the light of God and boast then about how rich you are.

That's not Christian silliness. That's like true, that's really true. It's God's perspective, it's wisdom. And the truth is the trial of being poor can become a blessing.

If it makes you value and long for the riches of eternal life more than a comfortable, wealthy person does, in London, we used to live next to an elderly woman from Guyana called Josie.

We lived in an ex-council block in Tower Hamlets and Josie was about, she was always about 80 as far as I could tell and she lived next door to us. Her flat was basically utterly bare and her life so humble.

[21 : 38] She had a brother, that's another story, who slept on a mattress and didn't have any sheets. But Josie, our next door neighbour, was wise. She knew her God, she was a Christian and she learned to trust and treasure her father through the hard circumstances of her life.

And Josie, she was just a beautiful woman. She loved God and she was looking forward to heaven and you couldn't stop her singing about Jesus as she walked along the corridor in her kind of awful, tiny but beautiful voice.

She was a poor woman, Josie, but she was persevering and beautiful and Christ-like and rich. She was living out, verse 9.

She was a wise woman. Okay, one. Second, in verse 10, the trial of riches. How can being richer than others be a trouble and a trial?

Now, some of us will know this, we try and hide this away. When you have cash and stuff, it is so tempting to become tethered to the here and now. You spend your days fretting about your possessions and whether there's one scratch on your car.

[22 : 59] You spend your days thinking about buying more insurance and guarding your kit. Something breaks and your life falls apart because it's become so precious to you. And when you have a decent amount of money, you start to imagine you are safe by yourself and you're in control of life.

Maybe, this does happen, maybe you travel more at weekends. Maybe if you've got more money, you spend fewer Sundays with your church family because you've got the cash to get away. And honestly, the pull of riches can deaden living faith in Christ. It is a trial. So say you're rich-ish today and you want wisdom from God so that your faith will grow and not wither. Here it is. This is God's perspective, verse 10. The rich should take pride in their humiliation since they will pass away like a wild flower.

Wisdom for rich people you will die soon because the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant.

[24 : 06] That's you, if you're rich. And 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. Having riches is a testing of your faith.

Here's some God-given wisdom whether you're asking for it or not. You will die maybe quite soon and all your wealth is utterly useless to you.

Could you allow that wisdom to strengthen your trust in the God who gives eternal life? Could it move you to sit lighter to your possessions and keep going with Christ and persevere?

Maybe some of us need that wisdom from God today. Because, as we get to the end of this passage, this really is what God would nurture in us through difficulties.

I'll just come back to the main idea. What does God want for us in the middle of our trials? He is looking for persevering faith. The kind of prayerful trust in him and his fatherly goodness that with the help of a church family around us as we're honest together and speak to one another and pray for one another, the kind of prayerful trust for each of us that weathers trials and treasures God more and more and keeps going.

[25 : 43] That is the Christian life, you see, in James 1. We're not Stoics. We're not Buddhists. We're not atheists. We who belong to Jesus are Christians and we believe in a Father who is good to us in the midst of our trials.

In the middle of trials, ask for wisdom, firstly, and then secondly, in the final minute and a half, persevere and then receive the crown of life.

I don't know if you know this, when God calls us, when you become a Christian, God calls you, forgives you, saves you, and adopts you into his family, your life becomes an endurance race, a marathon, and there's an elderly chap in the shadows.

And summing up this little section, verses 1 to 12, verse 12 has words of real encouragement to us, to us who are running hard in our lives. Look at this as we finish.

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.

[27 : 05] That's a verse to print out and stick on your mirror. Do you feel that your faith is being tested at the moment? Does it feel as though you're running hard and it's hurting?

As you face trials of many kinds, poverty, riches, illness, exhaustion, disappointment. Instead of giving up being a Christian, bitter towards him, would you know through God's word that God has a purpose for you?

Would you be able even to count it joy and pray and ask your father for wisdom and with his help walk through your troubles and your life in humble, dependent, faith?

Could you persevere, would we? And keep going and stand the test? Because this verse says to us there is a finish line and there is a reward promised to us.

Do you see it in those verses? This is how it will be on that future day. When having persevered together through trials, we will stand before the one we love.

[28 : 15] We will stand kind of battle-scarred and tested and faithful. We will stand mature and complete and Christ-like.

And on that day the Lord will crown us with eternal life as we make it to the finish line. Will you keep going? Will you count it something towards joy?

Will we pray together and persevere and trust in our God and make it home? I'm going to lead us in a prayer and pray that our Lord helps us so to do.

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.
Almighty God, you know the secrets of our hearts and the trials of our lives much more than we do. You see and know each one of us and every hardship now.
[29 : 32] Almighty God and Father, we pray that you would grant us wisdom. We pray that you would give generously to us. Please help us see something of how you might work in our lives.
Please grow in us persevering faith. Make us a church together who speak honestly about our trials and our sins and pray together and encourage and urge one another on.
and may that day come when we receive the crown of life from our Lord Jesus Christ who himself faced trial and suffering before rising from dead for us.
We entrust our lives into your hands in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.