

# The trials of life

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[ 0 : 00 ] Just take a glance down at verse 2. Do you not think at first hearing verse 2 sounds pretty crazy?! Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

Well, what do you think of that? So as you deal with long-term illness in your life, or you hear of a cancer diagnosis, consider it pure joy, says him.

As you struggle with having little money, maybe you're managing on very little, you know the pressure of trying to pay bills and clothe the kids and the benefits getting cut. Consider it pure joy. As you feel the pressure of being the Christian odd one out at work or online or amongst your friends, consider it pure joy.

As you face tension at home or work, as you encounter loneliness or infertility or a seemingly dead-end career, as you sense disappointment with how your life's gone so far, as you struggle with raising children, consider it pure joy, says James.

Which sounds like the worst kind of religious delusion, don't you think? Like you imagine a fanatic with a plastic smile who's lost touch with reality.

[ 1 : 21 ] I'm really joyful, but it's fake, it's not real, it's not human. Read a verse like this, it's so bold and clear in God's word. Either it is plain off-the-scale madness, or is it possible we might discover something in James 1 about trials and sufferings?

Is it possible we might discover something so profound and significant about how our world works, that it could just possibly at the deepest level change how we face life and difficulties?

Because it would be a transformation, wouldn't it? To face difficulties with something approaching joy. Over these three Sundays in May, what we're going to do is look at James 1, 1-18, which is all about trials and temptations.

You see the heading there. James wrote this letter, it's why it's called James, and in verse 1 he's a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's likely he's the actual brother of Jesus, one of Jesus' actual brothers, same mum and dad.

He grew up alongside the Son of God. At some point he started calling his brother Lord, as Alistair did, and this man James became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

[ 2 : 43 ] So this letter is from him, and he's speaking on behalf of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and he writes, verse 1 again, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

So almost from day one in the early church, Jewish Christians faced persecution and the Jerusalem church was scattered. So Christian families forced to leave their homes, trying to make new lives in new, often hostile places.

They were oppressed, they were often poor, in a world of famine and economic upheaval. And these first Christians were normal people, like us, trying to make ends meet, sometimes proud or happy or angry or sick, sometimes confused about being Christians, sometimes half-hearted.

And so here, to these scattered Christians facing trials of many kinds, and to us today, a loving word of instruction from God, consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials. Introduction not over yet. Before we dive in, let me just step back and say, in a church our size, there is all sorts of stuff going on in our lives, different situations, different pressures, some of which I know about, many of which I don't.

[ 4 : 05 ] We've mentioned already, ill health, disability, having little money, being hurt by others because you're a Christian. For some of us, the trial at the moment may be of being lonely, or the trial of an unhappy marriage, or desperately wanting to be in a relationship, or having a hard time with your children, or being childless.

Maybe for some of us, a past tragedy, a huge turning point, which has cast a shadow over all of life. Maybe the trial of constant pressure, or boredom.

Maybe a seemingly rubbish job, in what feels like a dead-end life. For some of us, we know obvious pressures now. For others, there will be trials just around the corner, they will come.

And some of us maybe are secretly at breaking point in some aspect of our lives. Because life can hurt, and trials will hurt very severely.

I just want to acknowledge that. And at the same time, say, forgive me if in this next 20 minutes or so, I speak a touch too clearly or glibly about things that hurt.

[ 5 : 16 ] It's not my intention. But James does want to instruct us here about life. And so I hope and pray that exploring these verses, and then talking together today, this week next, will help all of us, and will help me, as we face and walk through the trials of life.

Okay, introduction over. Three things I want to point us to this morning, just from verses 2 to 4, about the trials of life, for us to chew over together. What trials involve? What trials can produce? What trials can make you? So first thing this morning, from this text, what trials involve? They involve the testing of your faith. When hard times come into our lives, it is tempting to think either God's not there, or he doesn't care.

Many people today in our world say there is no God, and everything that happens to you is just luck or chance or fate. There's no purpose in it, there's nothing you can do. There's no one who sees and cares. It's just the way the world works, so suffer and suck it up.

Which is such a depressing outlook on life, without hope and untrue. You can though, at the same time, be some kind of believer, and understandably, when tough times come, you wonder to yourself, is he there?

[ 6 : 39 ] Or has he disappeared? Has he left me? The answer is, he hasn't left you. Verses 2 and 3. 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.

This verse is saying that in God's strange goodness, and under his hand, trials involve, verse 3, the testing of your faith.

That is, there can be, there is, God-given purpose in our difficulties. The word testing, it's the idea of gold and silver, or gold or silver being refined.

So you might not be able to see this, but apparently when gold comes out of the earth, it doesn't look pure and beautiful like the ring on your finger. It comes out as a lump. It is dull, with all sorts of impurities in it.

It's potentially valuable, for sure. It's potentially stunning. But to make the gold like that, you refine the lump and test it.

[ 7 : 52 ] It goes into the furnace. And as heat is applied, the impurities rise and you skim them away, and you carry on, and you carry on applying heat until you hold purity in your hand.

And this verse here says that the trials we face are the God-designed testing of our faith to refine us.

And I chose just verses 2 to 4 just to take this very slowly because this is so significant. What this verse gives us is the start of a Christian view of life's difficulties.

So in heaven I have a good and wise father. I believe that. And my first steps of faith in him as I turn and trust in him and follow Christ, as Alistair shared with us, that's a spectacular thing in God's eyes when a person does that.

That's glints of gold. And the God who loves me commits himself to me. He will never let me go. And more than that, he has designs for me, for my faith.

[ 9 : 02 ] Like the testing and refining of gold, his design for me and you can come through the furnace of trials. This is step one.

I guess you can see how massively important this is. When we're facing hurt and hardship, don't think that he is distant or gone or he doesn't care.

It's so tempting to think that. It's not true. If you belong to him, the illness or the disappointment you experience is the heat of the furnace that he can in his wisdom use for your life, for your good.

Is that possible to believe? In the details of your life right now, I don't know if you're in the middle of some long term trial or some present stress.

In and through your present circumstances, your good heavenly father does have purposes for you. The refining and the testing of your faith. First thing.

[ 10 : 09 ] Let's go on and ask, secondly, how could that work? Like how could it be that persecution or illness or loneliness produces anything good?

Point two this morning from these verses. What trials can produce? Perseverance. Perseverance. So let me read it 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 works. Perseverance.

And perseverance is, it's staying power. It's endurance. It's resilience. It's the ability to keep going. And James is saying here, when difficulties come into your life, your faith is tested and your faith in God can become stronger and purer and more resilient and more able to endure.

And to change the image a bit, Christian faith is like a muscle. It becomes stronger as it faces resistance.

[ 11 : 22 ] When I was living in London a long time ago, I was hunting around for a sport to be obsessed by. And I picked running and I wanted to run the London Marathon, which I never did.

And so to get me fitter and stronger, I joined the college running club. And I turned up for the first training session and I was super nervous. And like, I'm not that wide, but I felt like a big lump compared to these really skin and bones, long distance runners like you see on the telly.

And I had every reason to be nervous in the running club because we set off at what I thought was a sprint through the streets of London. It was just a warm up. And after half an hour, we arrived at a little park.

And in the middle of this park was a hill, at which point the training began. So all of us in a line run up the hill as fast as you can and then jog down and then repeat and down again and again and again.

It's a bad situation. We're all in the line and competing as we ran up and pretty quickly my heart, my legs were just on fire. It was such a painful hour.

[ 12 : 32 ] And yet within two months, four months, I was just a touch stronger and fitter and more able to endure.

And that was good. See that hill in London, I mean, we picked it. It was a trial. It hurt. And yet each time I made it up and kept going, my muscles and my heart grew more resilient.

And Christian faith is like a muscle. A living, trusting relationship with your heavenly Father, which you are designed for.

It grows and deepens and strengthens when we face difficulty and endure. We'll think what that actually looks like in a moment.

But before we do that, realise that thinking of your life like this, but realising of the Christian life like this, a heavenly Father who uses hardship to refine your faith, is pretty unfashionable.

[ 13 : 45 ] In the Bible though, being a Christian is pictured as being a soldier in a battle, an athlete in an endurance race. Fundamentally, as a child trained and disciplined by a loving father, there is testing and endurance.

But I think Christians can be tempted to assume and want to imagine that he's my daddy, who should just cuddle me and take away all the challenging things and pamper me and keep treating me like a five year old.

That sense of how we might imagine things should be, you see it in our culture as well. There's a guy called Ed Welch who wrote a good book about depression.

And there's a point where he says this, just a quote. Among those in the post-World War II generation, that's us, a wisp of happiness is the goal and suffering must be avoided at all costs.

If there are hardships in a relationship, end it. If there is an unpleasant emotion, medicate it. It is a generation that perceives no value to any hardship.

[ 15 : 00 ] Like a pampered child who has never experienced the regular storms of life, we lack the skill of growing through our trials. That's probably right. And so if you have that sort of sense of how things should be and you bring it into a relationship with God, what will happen when times of testing come?

The answer is you'll end the relationship. You're not the father I expected. I don't think you care. I'm off. And actually, I've been a Christian for 30 years now.

It is heartbreaking to remember people I know who've lived for God and then some suffering has come along and they've become bitter and ended it and they have stopped being Christians because they thought it's not meant to work like this.

And James is saying to us here, don't think like that. Don't be like that. The trials of life, the hills, the testing of faith are there to refine us, to grow our faith muscle, to deepen our faith and make us

more able to endure.

And what might that look like? We can talk about this afterwards together. Here's one example. Say you fall ill in some way.

[16:23] A broken toe or a cancerous growth or something long-term and degenerative mentally or physically. It's a trial. How on earth might God use that in your life?

One, maybe you come to realise that you had taken your health for granted. You were proud and vain and reliant on your strength.

You're such a strong man. And now your weakness is so much more obvious. And actually it makes you more grateful to him for life and breath now and it shows you how precious every day is in his world.

Is that bad? That is good if the Lord works that in you. You grow in that way. Three, maybe the message of the Gospel becomes more real to you.

And the reality of life and death is more in front of you now. God's promise to raise you from the dead and give you a new body. You long for that more so now than ever.

[17:26] Your trust in God more vital, more real. What's happening to you? Your faith is being refined, becoming more real, stronger.

You are keeping going. Your physical weakness, your mental health battles now, or in the past, they have changed you. You are being refined. You are being refined, becoming more real, stronger.

You are being refined, becoming more real, stronger. You are keeping going. I know there's some of us here at St John's who are able to say this and testify to this your physical weakness your mental health battles now or in the past they have changed you and you know it's just a beautiful thing when you meet a Christian who is not in full health and you see in them little bitterness but a battling enduring trust in God they're in the furnace and persevering and they sing at the top of their voices on Sunday mornings I'm talking about trials this morning just from James 1 here what trials involve the testing of your faith his design which he can use what trials can produce perseverance a faith muscle growing stronger and deeper but that's not the end of it final thing this morning we've said God has something in store for those who put their faith in him he has a design for those who go through the furnace of trials and that's the final thing from verses 2 to 4.3 what trials can make you they can make you mature and complete so from verse 3 again 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 so you see this as we face tough stuff and when persevering faith finishes its work what can we become

James says you may be mature and complete not lacking anything the word mature means the opposite of a five-year-old it means you're grown up you're everything you were designed to be you are fully developed you are holy the word complete means you're whole there's nothing lacking in you taken together you have become everything God would have you be as a human being in his world mature and complete you say what does that look like well put some flesh on it by asking which human being can you think of who would obviously be described as totally mature and complete and lacking nothing James knows he grew up with him the Lord Jesus Christ see think of Jesus the son of God and true man and the trials that he faced for he was not a pampered child and born in poverty weary and exhausted pressed and pressured by those around him his family thought he was out of his mind he did not live a sheltered life every day under God his faith was tested in the heat of difficulty and he prayed and he pressed on and then he set his face towards Jerusalem to suffer and in the garden of Gethsemane his faith was pressed to the limit he saw before him arrest and mockery and loneliness and death and bowing down he prayed father if you're willing take this cup from me and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground a furnace he was tested and pushed and from his lips amazing words yet not my will but yours be done as he surrendered himself to his father's will and he went out was nailed to a cross he declared father into your hands I commit my spirit that is faith and then he died and was raised from the dead to God's right hand this is Jesus who stands in heaven today as a battle-scarred tested faithful man a mature holy obedient man complete and glorious and God's purpose for us do you see this is to make us mature and complete people like the perfect man and one day if I can put it like this there will be millions upon millions of little Christs if that's okay to say populating his world did you know that that this is his purpose for you if you're a person who's come to Christ and put your faith in him his purpose for you is not to give you a cash rich sickness free shiny pampered life

now until the day you die painlessly his loving purpose for you personally the end product you're designed for and saved for is to be like Christ in your character to become holy and utterly dependent on your father and whole and complete and the way that he will make you like that and he is committed to doing this the way he will make you like that is through trials as we choose to trust him and keep going and grow and what trials involve the testing of your faith his good design which he can use

what trials can produce in us perseverance a faith muscle growing stronger what trials can make you mature and complete these few verses in James tell us that God is not a magician he's a craftsman it's tempting to want him to be a magician to wave his wand and sort out all our difficulties with a hey presto or a magic sponge he's not like that he's a craftsman I'm mixing my images this morning who takes logs from the forest that aren't much to look at you and me and then he begins to work on us he starts soaring and planing and then out comes the chisel and he chips away and knocks bits off your character until at the end you are the most astonishing statue you're fully formed you are perfect you are pure gold

[ 24 : 50 ] I want to ask if that makes sense to you do we not want that for ourselves to end up formed and mature and holy bearing the image of his son that is what God holds out to us that is what he's doing in us and that is what God is doing in and through the details and the trials of our lives right now so as together we face trials and we will do and many of us do you can take one path you can say God you're not for me and you become bitter and you run away James would say don't do that instead in the midst of our trials so severe for some of us we might pray Heavenly Father help me please refine my faith in this furnace of suffering please hear my prayers please deepen and strengthen my trust in you please grow in me a resilient faith that keeps going please change me and mature me Father and make me like your son is that the kind of prayer we could pray?

because if the message of James 1 makes sense to us and sinks in and were we to pray this kind of thing and as we reckon together that our God is good and he will work in our lives do you know what might just grow in us even in the middle of trouble?

Joy not grinning stupidly but a real deep down joy because I know that he's at work in me and he is refining me and he will finish his work and I will one day stand mature and complete before him I'm going to pray I'm going to lead us in a prayer and then we're going to sing together Consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of many kinds So conscious this morning Heavenly Father of the some seen and known and for others hidden trials in our lives some of us have been pushed to breaking point some of us may be on the edges of walking away from you in total despair yet you are our Lord and God and your great purpose is to work in us and through us and form us into the likeness of your Son we bow before you this morning we ask humbly that you would grant us wisdom to somehow see and sense your work in us as our faith is tested please grow in us a stronger deeper trust in you and we pray and trust that perseverance will finish its work and that one day we might stand before the throne scarred and yet whole and we ask that in Jesus name  
Amen