

James Shepherd

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[0 : 0 0] you all to gather as God's people, to sit under his word and be taught. As Sam mentioned, we are in a new series tonight looking at James at the end of hypocrisy, a series going through the book of James with the aim to bridge the gap between the way God has called us to live and the way we actually live. That we might live out of faith that reflects the deep convictions of scripture, showing that we are a people saved by grace and therefore such a conviction changes the way we live. Indeed, in this letter, we meet someone who experiences the very grace of God, which radically changes his life. James was a brother of Jesus and he grew up with him his whole entire life. But in the gospels, we are told that he didn't follow Jesus. He didn't believe in him. John 7, 5 says, for not even his brothers believed in him. And so James grew up with the very son of God in his own family. He heard every single word he taught, everything he did and said, but he didn't follow him. He didn't believe him. In fact, his whole family, we are told in Mark's gospel, thought he was crazy and said,

Jesus, stop doing that. Stop saying these things. They thought he was a bit of a lunatic. But this is not, this wasn't always going to be the case for James. You see, in 1 Corinthians 15, we're told this, For I delivered you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. It wouldn't be until James came face to face with the resurrected Lord Jesus, that he would come to believe all that Jesus had said and done, that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was the Christ, the promised one to come and save people from their sins.

And so years on, James is now the leader of a church in Jerusalem, and he's writing this letter to strengthen his brothers and sisters who are all dispersed across Asia Minor and into Europe.

They may live lives of faithfulness. Indeed, it's not a stretch to suggest that James wants his readers to be so impacted by the resurrection of Jesus as he was, and to see that it does change their life, and it does make a difference in the way they live.

[2 : 4 4] This book is not about moralism. It's not a book of proverbs. It's not a checklist to see how you are going in your faith. This book, this letter, is written with a deeply held conviction that the resurrection of Jesus changes lives forever, and what our faith looks like in the public's place, and how the resurrection, how the gospel shapes and changes our life.

And so with this in mind, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that tonight we can gather as your people. We can sit under your word and have you teach us.

And we just pray, Lord, as we read your word tonight, as we look and start our series on James, and looking at the issue of hypocrisy in our lives as Christians, that you would challenge us, that you would rebuke us, that you would lead us towards repentance for our sin, but also, Lord, that you would encourage us, you would strengthen us, and you would embolden us, that you would help us to see that the gospel that we so clearly and hold convictingly, that does change our life, and it can influence the way we live.

And so, Father, we just pray tonight, that tonight you would help us to see this in your word and to live according to it. We pray this in your Son's name. Amen. I don't know if you've ever read an email or a Facebook message or a letter, if you still get letters, and the very first line of the actual content of the Facebook message or the email takes you back a little bit.

It's a bit abrupt. It might be really offensive. You might be a little bit blown away about what this person is just saying to you from the word go. And that's the kind of way I feel about James with his opening statement.

[4 : 40] It's abrupt. It makes a huge presumption. It's offensive in a way at first reading. It says, Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

That is crazy. That is abrupt. There's a bit of a punch in the face. James, what part of our trials, of our suffering, are we to consider as pure joy?

Or all joy? Is that even possible? James doesn't want to waste any time here. From the very beginning, from the very beginning, he writes to a bunch of Christians wanting to show how our core and deeply held convictions in the gospel of Jesus impact our life.

And the very first conviction, the very first implication of the gospel, is a punch in the face that turns our world upside down. Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds.

Now, James is quick to show why. We are to consider joy in trials because they produce perseverance for our faith. And we are told that the results of this perseverance is our perfection, wholeness, and lacking in nothing.

[6 : 01] The gospel impacts us by shaping the way we think about trials and about suffering. And so in a world that's so obsessed with security, with safety, that fears danger and suffering, the gospel turns on its head about suffering and says you ought to consider these things pure joy.

They're not to be afraid, not to be feared. We shouldn't see them as threatening, but instead, because of the way the gospel has impacted us, we see them as pure joy.

Our sufferings and trials show us that we aren't in control. We can't do anything to assure our complete protection and security against them.

But this is why we should consider it pure joy when we experience suffering, because it serves as a constant reminder of our need to rely on God and not on ourself.

Trials teach us lessons about our need for God's sustaining grace and humble us from thinking that we can do life on our own. And although the various trials we might face in our life might try to rob us of our joy, in the end, as we are told here, they should only go to serve our joy because our trials always point us to our need of God.

[7 : 27] Indeed, they remind us of our need of God and of how God has already provided for us in His Son. It can be hard to see how suffering can achieve all this, especially when we're in the midst of it all.

How can a good God, who says He loves us, allow for suffering to occur in the world and in our life and say, consider it joy because it's going to achieve these things for you.

It's hard when we're in the thick of it all. It's hard to see the bigger perspective of what our trials and our suffering is achieving for us. And this is why James goes on to talk about the need for wisdom.

He says in 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. As trials test our faith that we might persevere, proven in the end to be lacking in nothing, James points out that we might be inhibited in persevering if we lack wisdom.

This wisdom is not merely intellectual or philosophical. This is the wisdom of the gospel that impacts our life and transforms the way we view life in regards to suffering and trials.

[8 : 51] It shows us that we should not be afraid, that we shouldn't feel threatened by the experience, but that we should see it for what it really is, an experience that tests our faith in order to preserve it, to keep it.

But to see all this, we need to embrace gospel wisdom. That should be our first response in suffering, to ask God for wisdom in order that we might respond well and suffer well, seeing it as a tool for the preservation of our faith.

The reason why we struggle so much with trials and suffering is because we struggle to see their purpose. And especially when you look around at other people in our life who don't seem to be struggling at all, who seem to have it all, who really in this world don't like anything, it can be really hard to look at those people and not think, why can't I be like that?

Psalms 73 is one of those psalms I think many of us can relate to. The psalmist is lamenting of his own struggle and he opens with this, truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart, but as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped, for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked for they had no pains until death.

Their bodies are fat and sleek, they are not in trouble as others are, they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Like the psalmist here, we struggle to see sometimes our neighbours, our work colleagues and even our friends when they have it so easy, who don't seem to like anything, who own their house, own their nice car, go on holidays, and yet all the while never seem to struggle with any kind of suffering or trial in their life.

[10 : 51] They just cruise through life and enjoy it at every single point while we face so many sufferings and so much trial, which rob us of our health, our money, and our relationships.

And so this can make it just really hard to simply accept what the Bible is saying here, that we should consider it all joy. And not just that, but to accept it as not only the right response to suffering, but as the best response to suffering.

We have, in the next few verses, in verses 9 to 11, what seems to be a general proverbial teaching on the poor and the rich and how the poor will be exalted and the rich humiliated.

But if we read closely, I think we can see James is applying this gospel wisdom and the way it changes our view on material wealth.

That it turns on the world's head, the world's view, on what it means to be perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing. And so it shows why we should have a joyful response and why that response is the best response.

[12 : 05] So verse 9 reads, believers in humbler circumstances ought to take pride in their position, but the rich should take pride in their humiliation since they will pass away like a wildflower.

What we see here is a picture of the impact the gospel wisdom has both on the rich and on the poor. The lowly believer takes pride in his exaltation for whilst they lack in material things, gospel wisdom shows them that they have everything in Christ.

They lack nothing spiritually. Indeed, it's very much like what Jesus said in Matthew 5 in the Beatitudes, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.

And the rich boast in their humiliation for although they have had it all, they didn't like anything in life, they had every single material possession you could possibly have and they were fulfilled and content in this life.

Gospel wisdom impacts them by showing them that their material possessions are nothing compared to what can only be gained in Christ's eternal life.

[13 : 20] Gospel wisdom makes such pursuits in wealth and in material things silly and stupid because they fade away compared to the gospel which is eternal.

This little illustration is loosely connected to the theme of suffering but the point is that the gospel turns our world on its head. What it means to be whole, perfect and lacking in nothing.

that our wholeness and perfection is not dependent on worldly material things, it's dependent on Christ and his work on the cross to make us whole.

This means we look at our world in a whole new way. We look at our experiences and our possessions and our life within a much bigger perspective than the here and now.

and this includes our trials and suffering which is why we read in verse 12 following on from this 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.

[14 : 34] To those who might lack in this life who otherwise go through immense suffering and face trials but persevere trusting in God they will receive the crown of life.

They will live with God forever. It's a great blessing we have as Christians this promise this wisdom that comes from the gospel.

For the world the world today is perplexed about how to deal with the issue of suffering of death of trials they don't have an answer. They pretty much just say ignore it do your best in pursuing riches and worldly things and just hope for a better outcome hope for the best outcome.

But as Christians we have been so dramatically transformed by the power of the gospel by the death and resurrection of Jesus which shapes the way we view life as we view it through the wisdom of the gospel.

And what it tells us is that suffering and trials whilst are horrible whilst are painful they are not bigger or more powerful than God.

[15 : 55] Indeed God has proven his power over them by using them as a means of preserving our faith and keeping us on track that we might end up perfect and right and whole and lacking in nothing.

And so we as Christians can do something that's so counter-cultural that's so offensive in our world today we can actually take joy in our sufferings.

I think it was John Piper who said God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him in the midst of lost not prosperity.

What makes God look so good and so worthy of worship is when we can go to God in the midst of so much pain and trouble and still say God you are good.

God you are worthy. Not when we have it all worked out when in the pit of despair we can still say God is good.

[16 : 59] That is the wisdom of the gospel played out in the Christian life. God is but the question I want to ask is do we actually take joy in our trials?

Do we truly believe that in the midst of trials and suffering that the best response to these trials and suffering is joy? Do our lives reflect joy?

God is in control. God is in control. He will take care of us. by believing one thing and doing another.

By saying we live this way but actually living in a totally different and opposite way. And I think for many of us we take great comfort in this chapter here in James 1.

And so when we are faced with times we often verbalize to ourselves and to each other God is in control. He will take care of us. This is like all according to his plan.

[18 : 00] But how often do we see this reflected in our life, in our actions? We might have speech that shows that we've been impacted by gospel wisdom and say the right things in suffering but has it impacted our life and our actions and the way we live?

When I'm faced with trials and hard times I struggle to always run to God and not to worldly things. And if I can be honest, when I feel the pressure of life, when I feel depressed and unhappy because of trials, I generally turn to the gym.

I increase the time I spend at the gym hoping that it will make me feel good, hoping that as I continue to work out I will be able to build a better image of myself and feel more whole and feel more perfect and feel like I lack nothing because I'm working out.

And what also goes hand in hand with this is that I might buy new clothes as well because I want to portray this whole image where I look good and I feel good and I look perfect or I look whole and I look like I've got all my problems all sorted out.

All the while though, I'm telling myself and telling others, no, no, God's in control of my life and he's got a plan for this and I'm trusting in him. At the same time also encouraging others in their struggles and their trials saying, oh, don't worry, God's in control.

[19 : 35] Don't worry, God's got a plan for your life. Except, you know, my own actions don't reflect that in the way I'm dealing with that myself. Now this is the hypocrisy I see in my life.

What might it be in yours? Where do you turn to instead of God in your actions that doesn't reflect what you say and believe?

If we could go back for a moment to the section on wisdom, you may notice I left out a little bit there on how to ask for it. We're just going to read it from verse six again. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown, 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 if we want gospel wisdom to help us see the bigger perspective of suffering, we must ask and believe and not doubt.

Now this belief is more than just in regards to believing something will happen. Now this belief, this command to believe is more tied to loyalty.

[20 : 52] So James is saying ask living a life that's loyal to God. And so to doubt then here is more than just being unsure that God's going to give you something or being unsure something will happen.

Doubt here is more tied with the idea of being divided. It is to be unsure where your loyalties lie. And we see this in the illustration that follows.

This divided person is like a wave tossed to and fro. He is unstable and double-minded. He is completely divided in his loyalty and so of course he's not going to receive anything from God.

Is it possible that this might be a picture of us as well? Can we truly say that we have been impacted by the wisdom of the gospel saying true things about it when our lives don't even reflect it?

Is it possible that we ask in a divided manner? Saying one thing but living in a completely different way. Saying we trust in God and we know he's planned for our suffering but in our actions we run to worldly things that make us feel whole, that make us feel like we lack nothing but in reality leave us empty.

[22 : 16] James points out the hypocrisy I think many of us struggle with. We believe, we believe so hard that suffering and trials must have a purpose and do lead to the preservation of our faith but so often our actions would say otherwise.

What we do would say otherwise. And so James is calling us to have an undivided loyalty to the gospel of Jesus. To have a faith that does not sit on the fence or say one thing and do another.

James is calling believers as they ask for gospel wisdom to do so totally trusting in God. Giving him, giving them, sorry God, their undivided devotion to him.

Both in speech and in action. we must look at our actions and ask ourselves if we are divided in our devotion to God, saying one thing and doing another.

And we must ask ourselves, does that need to change? And what needs to change? However, we'll talk more about that throughout this series as it comes up.

[23 : 31] As we continue on, we see that the result may be if we remain divided in our loyalty, is that if we abandon gospel wisdom, is that our trials and suffering will lead us instead to think that God is to blame for them.

So if you look at verse 13, it says this, 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 is conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it's full grown, gives birth to death. Again, what we read here is very good wisdom on its own, but in its context, James intends to say so much more.

People who are divided in their loyalty to God, who don't have the gospel wisdom to perceive God's bigger perspective, generally end up blaming God for their suffering and trials.

trials. They struggle to deal with their suffering and trials on their own, and so they conclude it can't be their fault, since it must be God, since he is in control.

[24 : 45] It must be him who's tempting them to live in the opposite way. Instead of seeing the dichotomy between what they believe about suffering, and what they say and do in response, as an example of their hypocrisy, they see it as an example of God tempting them.

They blame their failure to do the right thing in their response to suffering on God. James wants to correct this, and correct us who might think this way.

He says God cannot be tempted, nor tempt anyone. We are tempted by our own evil desire, and when we are enticed by sin to sin.

And James tells us a little more as well. He tells us about the effects of sin. Interestingly, similar effects to what trials are supposed to achieve for the Christian as well. It says, then after the desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it's full grown gives birth to death.

The word full grown, the word perfection earlier on, come from the same family of words in the Greek. And so the reality is, our response to trials and suffering either puts us on a trajectory towards being made whole and perfect, lacking in nothing, where we get to enjoy God's presence forever, or it puts us on a trajectory where we don't see the bigger picture of their purpose.

[26 : 19] We continue to seek our perfection and our lacking in nothing in earthly, material things, and where we begin to blame God when we can't respond rightly, which therefore leads us into sin and then bringing death.

There is no middle ground here. Our response to trials and suffering will either lead to life or will lead to death.

This is why this is serious. And we must ask ourselves, do our actions reflect what we believed? Do my words and sentiments about God's plan and power in suffering actually match up to the way I act and live in my life?

Or is there a clear hypocrisy between the two? James starts with a punch, doesn't he? A massive punch.

But it's good that he does. For he knows how big of an issue suffering is for the Christian and how perplexing it can be for a Christian to try and reconcile how a good God can allow suffering to happen to people who otherwise love him and trust him.

[27 : 39] He writes this to point out our hypocrisy, which stings, which hurts. But he doesn't do it to condemn us, but to implore us to adopt gospel wisdom, that we might see our suffering and our trials through the lens of the cross and what's achieving for us.

He knows suffering and trials can rob us of our joy in this life, but he is telling us that suffering may harm us and it will harm us in this life. It will rob us of all that we have.

And it will take away joy in this life, potentially. But within God's great sovereignty, suffering and trials cannot rob us of our eternal joy in being saved in Christ, in being his forever, in knowing and being in relationship with him.

suffering and trials only go to serve such joy as it's merely an instrument, a tool to preserve our faith.

And this comes from gospel wisdom. This comes when we are impacted by the gospel. And so unlike the world, our security is not in our stuff.

[29 : 03] Our security is not in making sure that we remain safe for the rest of our life. In making sure we have our insurances and health insurances and car insurances and a roof over our head.

Our security and our hope is in the gospel. It's in something far greater and far more powerful. gospel. And this is why in the last few verses, in response to those who would say God is tempting them, he says this, 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 first fruits of all he created. Don't be deceived.

This is what we need to remember today. Don't be deceived. Everything that is good comes from God. Everything that is perfect comes from him.

[30 : 13] And dare I say it, included in these gifts are suffering and trials. Not that in and of themselves are they good gifts, but in terms of what they achieve for us, what they accomplish for us, God permits them.

And so therefore, they are good gifts and should be seen as such because they are helping us in persevering and preserving our faith that we might be brought to a place of perfection, wholeness, where we lack nothing for eternity.

They serve us in the end. And that's the way, that's the, sorry, that's because gospel wisdom shows us that they do.

And I think the best way we can see them as achieving this purpose is by looking at the greatest gift that God has given us. Verse 18, he chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

The greatest gift that God has given us is life, which came through his son. And remember the way which the son was able to give us life.

[31 : 30] The cross. The cross, the greatest gift to humankind was one at the same time, the greatest suffering of all time to any human.

I'll say it again. The greatest gift to humankind was one and at the same time the greatest suffering of all time to any human in history.

And so as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, this is a stumbling block to the Jews saying that God died to save us. And it's foolishness to the Greek for how can one man's suffering prevent our eternal suffering?

How can one man's death bring us life? But the reality is to us here who are called, who believe, to us here who have been impacted by the gospel, it is the wisdom of God.

And it's this cross-shaped wisdom that now becomes the paradigm, the pattern of our life in the way we view suffering and trials to come.

[32 : 41] Instead of seeing them as life-taking, instead of seeing them as life-destroying, as joy-destroying, we rejoice in them because the gospel shows us that they are life-preserving.

They are joy-giving. And they are eternally so. And so throughout all the struggles and hardships of life, throughout the times which we feel our sufferings and our trials are just robbing us of our joy and robbing us of a life that is fulfilling, we can say faithfully of the psalmist towards the end of Psalm 73, whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Amen.