

Facing Trials with Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks so much for reading, Margot. Keep your Bibles open, and you'll need those verses in front of you. And let me pray before we begin. Heavenly Father, I pray that your spirit would be at work in this room this evening, that you'd be at work in me as I preach, and at work in all of us as we hear your word for us this evening.

Would it be challenging? And would it be comforting? We pray in your son's precious name. Amen.

Life is hard, isn't it? Whether you're a Christian here tonight or not, we know this, don't we? We all in this life face trials of many different kinds.

Maybe you're chronically ill. Maybe you've just got a bit of a sore back as you sit there in that pew. Maybe each year you find it very difficult to fill in your tax return.

Or maybe you're just not sure where the money's going to come from to pay for your weekly food shop next week. Maybe you've had a disagreement with your husband or your wife or your children or your siblings.

[1 : 2 4] Maybe you haven't spoken to them for years. Maybe your trials are actually just quite hard to put a finger on. Maybe they're secret.

Or they're in your head. But they're nonetheless very real. The truth is, sometimes we put ourselves through trials, don't we?

But other times they just seem to happen to us. Well, whatever it is that we face. Whether we're in it now. Or we're preparing to face trials in the future.

Or we're looking back on trials that we've faced in the past. James wants us to ask this question. How does our faith work when the going gets tough?

And I think in our passage this evening, James helps us answer that question. I think James says, Faith gets growth. Faith wants wisdom.

[2 : 2 7] And faith possesses perspective. Gets growth. Wants wisdom. And possesses perspective. We'll get there. But first, since we're starting a new series in this letter, I want to just spend a little bit of time getting our heads into the book.

So let me illustrate how I think this book works. It's been a bit of a trend this year. I don't know if you've noticed it. Maybe you have yourself picked up a new skill. We've all spent a little bit more time at home.

I've been in the kitchen. I've been learning how to make sourdough bread. It's a notoriously difficult thing to get right, sourdough. It takes 36 hours from start to finish.

It's quite a complicated thing. And yet really, it only has two ingredients. Well, three if you include a pinch of salt. But really, it's just flour and water. A complicated thing, but with relatively few ingredients.

And I think the book of James, this letter that we're about to dive into, I think it's sort of the opposite. See, this book, it has many ingredients. It covers lots of topics, loads of themes.

[3 : 36] Maybe if you just flick through it, you'll notice some of those headlines. And they really do seem quite different to one another. Trials, listening, favoritism, faith, the tongue, wisdom, boasting.

All these things that James wants his readers to do, there's loads of imperatives in this letter. But it can seem quite random.

There are many ingredients. But I hope as we spend some time in this letter this summer, that we will see that James actually has a relatively simple message and a surprisingly narrow purpose.

Have a look at verse 1 with me. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

So we have this letter. It's obviously a letter from the greeting there. And it's written by James. We can be fairly confident that that's James, the brother of Jesus. And at this time, he was the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

[4 : 38] But the question is, who is he writing to? Who are the twelve tribes scattered among the nations? Lots of the commentators think that James is writing just to Christians, a sort of very general letter to all Christians everywhere.

The twelve tribes then referring to the true spiritual Israel. Christians who are in exile in this world, scattered among the nations because heaven is their real home.

And I think that there's definitely some truth in that. This letter is certainly, we will see, applicable to all Christians ever. But for what it's worth, I think that James' audience is much more specific than that.

I think that he's writing especially to Jewish Christians. The letter is just littered with very Jewish references. And specifically, I think that these are Jewish Christians who have scattered from Jerusalem in the wake of a great persecution.

A great persecution that we'll see just the beginnings of next Sunday in our series and Acts. In the wake of Stephen's stoning. If you want a preview of that, go check out Acts chapter 8.

[5 : 56] The first few verses there will help. But more than that, I suspect that James is writing to tackle a very specific problem among these early Jewish Christians.

Again, from the book of Acts. You see, Paul, the apostle Paul, he's converted in Acts chapter 9. And immediately we read there that he begins preaching the gospel.

But we then don't hear much from him until he heads off on his big journey in Acts chapter 13. And it's not obvious in the narrative of Acts, but that's 10 years later.

10 years from Paul being converted to his first big journey. 10 years, more or less, that Paul is preaching to these scattered Jewish believers. And we know, don't we, from Paul's letters, that his emphasis in the gospel was on justification by grace through faith.

That it's not what we do, but what God has done that saves us. That's the gospel that if you're a Christian here today, you delight in, don't you?

[7 : 02] But it's also a gospel that is very easy to abuse. And maybe that's what's going on with these early Jewish Christians. They've heard this gospel and they're abusing it.

But if they're saved by grace through faith, then surely they can just do whatever they want. Maybe sometimes we live like that too. I'm forgiven.

I'm free. And so my sin is no big deal. Well, this book we will find is going to be a real challenge to that sort of thinking and that sort of living.

See, at this stage, Paul, he also hasn't written any of his letters yet. He hasn't had a chance to clarify, to explain the implications, to show them how to live as a result of that gospel.

And it seems in James's letter that the result of that is some seriously bad behavior. I think then that James is writing as the leader of the very early Jewish church to combat that misunderstanding, to remind the believers that the way that they live is still incredibly important.

[8 : 11] In particular, as we go through this letter, we'll see that it's as though these believers are behaving badly, especially towards one another. Now, I can't prove that stuff about Paul, but I am convinced by it as I've done my reading.

If you have questions about that, do come and chat to me. But I think that relatively narrow purpose might help us make sense of those apparently random themes, that long list of ingredients.

And it also gives us a relatively simple message for the book as a whole. James, I think, says to these scattered Jewish Christians, faith works.

Faith works. And this evening, he asks an even more specific question. We've already asked it. How does faith work when the going gets tough?

How does the Christian navigate the challenges of life? Trials, as James calls them. Have a look at verse 2 with me. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

[9 : 19] Just notice there that James says whenever. Not if you face trials, but when you face trials. It's desperately sad, isn't it, that some Christians have been taught and will teach that the Christian life should be one where trials are non-existent.

That as Christians, we should expect an easier ride in life. But friends, that simply isn't true. We know that isn't true. I mean, maybe you're suffering today.

Or you face a difficult situation at work. Maybe your own ill health. The loss of a loved one. Whatever your trials are, I just want to say, please do not be ashamed of your suffering as a Christian.

Because James is clear. The Bible is clear. Christians are not exempt from suffering. And so how does James say we are to approach our trials?

Well, in this verse, what does he say? Consider it pure joy. Which is a really strange thing to say, isn't it? Joy in trials?

[10 : 31] Let me quote from Sam Albury as we think about this. He's written this very helpful little book on James. I'd commend it to you. It's called James for You by Sam Albury. Do pick up a copy. It's brilliant.

And in it, he says this. He, that is James, is not telling us so much how to feel as how to think. He's not saying pretend this is fun.

Nor is he calling us always to have a sickly grin or a stiff upper lip. No. James is telling us to think about our trials in a certain way.

There is a point of view we need to adopt. A particular way to consider what is going on. I think that's exactly right. You see, James is telling us that though Christians will face trials, just as anyone in the world might, our faith really does make a real difference to the way we think as we face those trials.

How does faith work when things get tough? Well, I alluded to it at the start. Faith gets growth. Faith wants wisdom. And faith possesses perspective.

[11 : 39] So let's unpack each of those as we go through this passage. First way to think about our trials, to see how faith works in them, is to know that through them we get growth.

Have a look at verses 3 and 4 with me. 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.

In a sense then, the trials that these believers were facing were intended to test their faith. Not to call their faith into question, but rather to draw it out.

To improve and perfect their faith. We know how this works, don't we? If you're at all sporty or you understand sport, you'll know that by pushing yourself, testing yourself, that's how you improve.

That's how you get fitter and stronger and refine your skill. And this refining process in terms of faith is supposed to bring out perseverance.

[12 : 48] Do you notice that? The testing of your faith produces perseverance. In other words, as their faith is tested and refined, it is strengthened.

And so as they come across more trials in life, it will be stronger than it was before. It will be, their faith will be more able to weather those storms.

More than that, in verse 4, the goal of that process, do you see it? Is maturity and completeness. The sense of both of those words is perfection.

The goal is Christian perfection. In other words, Christ-likeness. To be like Jesus. And for a group of dispersed Jewish Christians who are behaving particularly badly, isn't that just such an important place to start?

Life might be hard, James says, but that is no excuse to stick your faith into neutral. No, your faith must be at work. And as it works, as you navigate these trials with it, you will continue to grow into Christ-likeness.

[14 : 01] Not that you will achieve that perfection in this life, but that that will be the direction of your lives, growing through trials. And for us, in the trials that we face day to day, here is James' first helpful pointer.

Allow yourself to grow through them. And witness yourself grow through them. But look, maybe you're here this evening and you're right in the thick of it.

Even today, maybe facing the trials of life. Maybe you're finding it really difficult to see how these trials are refining you, refining your faith, helping you to persevere, growing you to perfection.

Maybe you just can't see that. If that's you, stay with me. There's more from James in these verses that I think will help you. But also, I want to say, make sure that you have people around you who know you, who have seen you grow, who can encourage you in that.

This life of faith, it's not meant to be done in isolation, but it's a life of community because we grow together. Just like Andy was saying this morning, things that are alive grow.

[15 : 09] We do that together. Maybe you've been a Christian for some time. I wonder, could you be playing that role in someone else's life? Maybe it's also worth casting your mind back.

Many, I know, find it helpful to keep a diary or a journal. And I'm sure that is a really helpful way to record and to witness your own growth. But whatever you do, be asking yourself, how have I grown through my trials?

What has God been teaching me through this? This is James' first helpful pointer for putting faith to work. Recognize that through your trials, you get growth.

Next, in verses 5 to 8, James says that we should want wisdom through trials. Do you notice how verse 4 finished?

James said the goal of growth in trials was to be not lacking anything. But James says, have a look at verse 5 with me, 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.

[16 : 18] I think the implication here is that just because you will be growing through your trials, that does not mean that you will always know what to do through your trials. Again, we know that's true, don't we?

And you can imagine for these scattered believers, James and the apostles are still in Jerusalem, and these scattered believers, without their teaching, they know that they're saved by grace.

But as the heat is turned up in their trials, they might be thinking, why does it matter how we live? Well, James is saying, true faith does work when the going gets tough, and you can ask God for wisdom in that, because he loves to give gifts to his people.

Indeed, he does so without finding fault. I love that. Don't you love that about our God? We're often told by the secular world around us to think of our God as some sort of bewigged judge in the sky, watching our every move, rewarding and chastening us based on our performance.

But our God is not like that. He gives generously to all without finding fault. And if we ask, he will help us to know what to do through our trials.

[17 : 32] He will give us wisdom. But James says, and have a look at verse 6, when you ask, you must believe and not doubt.

Is James saying that if we have sufficient faith, if we believe with all our hearts and all our minds, then God will answer all our prayers and give us all wisdom and indeed all the good things?

Again, sadly, there are those who teach that you can claim more or less anything in the name of Jesus. And if you have enough faith that will be given to you, a new car, a new job.

Do you need some physical healing? Maybe even smaller things. I've lost the TV remote. And look, God may well give such good things to his people. We know that he loves to do that, but not because we ask with a particular measure of faith and claim it in his name.

That's not what James is saying here. We're going to come across this kind of thing again in chapter 5. But for now, what is James saying? I think what he's saying is when he talks about doubt here, I think he seems to be referring to inconsistent lives more than inconsistent thoughts.

[18 : 48] Do you see that at the end of verse 8? What does it say there? They are double-minded and they are unstable in all they do. In other words, they have split allegiances.

They might profess faith. They might even really believe. But they're not putting their faith to work. They're like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

They're allowing their circumstances, their trials, to dictate their actions. For those that James was writing to, he says your faith should want wisdom, want God's wisdom through your trials.

Do not use your trials as an excuse to behave badly. Isn't that so often the temptation? Certainly I find when I face challenges in life, whether they're big or small, it's very easy to become unstable in all I do.

Especially, and I think this is a really big problem in this letter, in the way that I relate to other people. Do you find that? Don't you find that when you face trials in life, it very quickly starts to affect your relationships?

[20 : 01] Maybe you start blaming other people. Or you just become short and snappy with those that you love. I am rubbish at that. Forgetting to put your faith to work through trials.

And so friends, instead of running away from God in those moments, with our trials, let's run to him and want for his wisdom. And the wisdom that he gives us in this book, we'll come across it again in chapter three.

But there James says, God is the wisdom of humility. A wisdom that forces us to look in the mirror before we look out of the window.

To ask, how are my trials and my sin affecting this situation and the way that I feel about it? Before we ask, how are they and their sin affecting this?

Look in the mirror before we look out of the window. Again, maybe that's just a small preview of what we're going to get in chapter three. But here in chapter one, James first tells us to see how we are growing through our trials.

[21 : 12] And he also says, want wisdom through our trials. Finally then, and most importantly, I think, James tells his readers that they can possess perspective in their trials.

And firstly, the perspective that they will not last forever. Have a look at verse nine. 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. The gospel is a great leveler, isn't it?

And how important are these verses then? For these first century Jewish believers, the world around them, just like ours, it placed a huge value on the material.

You were given worth based on your accumulation of wealth. And that created, as it always does, huge societal tensions. Especially, I think, in this letter within the church.

[22 : 18] We end up with believers behaving badly towards one another. James picks this up again at the end of chapter four and into chapter five. But here he has something to say, both to poor and to rich.

He's saying that if you have very little in this world, consider how much you have in Christ. Just as he died and was raised to glory, so too, in as much as you died with him, are you a citizen of that heavenly city.

And so take pride in your position as a follower of Christ. But for the rich, and I take it that's most of us living in this city as we do, he says, forget all you have in this life.

All your material wealth. Again, just as he came from heaven to earth, God become man and humbled himself even unto death.

So you who are rich, who though you look impressive, humble yourselves in the eyes of this world and receive instead the unimpressive looking blessings of Christ.

[23 : 54] For they cannot be withered and scorched by the rising sun, and their beauty shall never fade. Very often, I think, we equate trials with material poverty.

I don't know if you do that. I definitely do that. Something I found especially challenging this week. I think if I just had enough money, then I'd be able to fix all my problems, all my trials.

We certainly don't think of having lots of money as a trial, do we? But I think James is saying that to be rich can be a trial in and of itself.

Yes, in this life, but more significantly, it's spiritually precarious. For all of us, our wealth is a trial of faith. Because on one hand, it is very easy to become self-reliant when your wallet is full.

To feel as though we don't really need Jesus in our trials. To seek to put our wealth to work, rather than putting our faith to work.

[25 : 08] And on the other hand, ironically, I think, riches actually do very little to solve our trials in life. We know, don't we? Don't we know that money doesn't make us happy?

And money often brings trials of its own. Particularly relational trials. Again, it's all over this letter.

With friends and family, the way that society around us sees you, it changes. Even the anxiety of knowing that your wealth cannot last.

And not only will your material wealth fail to last, but in verse 11, have a look at verse 11, the rich will fade away.

You yourself will not last forever. There's no escaping that. I hope that's not a surprise. But we will all die.

[26 : 09] And when we do, what's the point of it all? What was it that Margo just read for us in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 just now?

At the end of that passage said this, Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless. A chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. That's the same sort of perspective that James is reminding his readers of here. You will not last forever.

And it all seems like a bit of a downer at this stage, doesn't it? You might face trials, James is saying, but one day you'll die, so none of it really matters.

What an unsatisfactory end. But James doesn't simply offer the perspective that you won't last forever. Because also, wonderfully, in verse 12, let's bring it home with this.

[27 : 12] He offers the perspective that they can live forever. Possess that perspective. Read it with me in 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.

The crown of life. That's eternal life. Though you will not last forever, you can live forever. This is what James really wants his readers to see.

As they face the trials of life, the trials that will come, as they put their faith to work in those trials, he wants them to see that, actually, it will all be worth it in the end.

Because he wants them to possess an eternal perspective. For these early Jewish believers, those who seem to be behaving badly towards one another, though they seem to have missed the implications of the gospel, though they haven't realized that real faith works when the going gets tough, what they really need to know, what we really need to know, as we face the trials of life, is that they will not last forever, but we can live forever.

And so this is where we land. As you face trials in life, as your Christian brothers and sisters around you face trials in life, it's important, isn't it, to put our faith to work.

[28 : 52] Because yes, we can grow through our trials. Yes, we can navigate them with God's wisdom. But ultimately, we can know that one day they will pass, and not just temporarily, not just in place of some other trial, not just in place of the nothingness of death.

Because yes, one day, though we will die through faith, we will nevertheless live forever. that we will wear the crown of life in a place where trials are no more.

Let's wait together in eager anticipation of that day. How does faith work when the going gets tough?

Well, it gets growth. It wants wisdom. but really, it possesses an eternal perspective. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the cross of Christ. Thank you that as we look to Jesus, we can know, by faith, that all our sins have been dealt with there.

[30 : 11] Lord, we thank you for this letter, for James' insight as he helps badly behaved believers like us put our faith to work.

Lord, I pray that by your spirit you would help each of us to grow, to be more like Jesus as we tackle the many various trials of life or be with us.

Give us your wisdom. Help us recognize how much we need you. And ultimately, Lord, help us persevere in faith to the very end so that one day we might live together with you forever.

in your kingdom. We pray because we can in your son's precious name. Amen.