

## ‘WHENEVER YOU FACE TRIALS’ JAMES 1:1-18

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday 16 October, 2022 – All Services]**

### **1. A Passage Very Few Of Us Really Believe?**

I’m not sure I know many Christians who really believe these verses. Sometimes I’m not sure if I do. Of course, I don’t mean that most of us would like to tear this page out of our Bibles. In fact I’m pretty sure that if you asked just about everyone here today/tonight whether they believe James 1 we’d all say “yes, absolutely”. But I’m not talking at this point about what we believe in theory. I’m talking about what we believe in practice. I’m talking about what the way we live our lives says about what we believe.

This passage says that when we suffer, whatever the trial might be, that we should consider it pure joy. It doesn’t say you could possibly think of it that way. It doesn’t say you should find just a little bit of joy in the midst of the pain. And it doesn’t say you should make it your ambition in the midst of suffering to cope well, or even to find acceptance of what comes your way. No. James says- ‘consider it’, ‘pure’, ‘joy’. Consider it pure joy!

So why do I say I’m not sure I know many Christians who really believe these verses? Well, there are a few signs, I think. I wonder if you’ve seen these signs too? When I see Christians struck with some kind of tragedy or trouble, my experience is that they often feel shocked by it. When Christians suffer, I often hear them questioning God- asking why this has happened to them. Sometimes I even hear them expressing anger with God- anger about their circumstances or about the pain those circumstances have caused. Mostly, I would say, the main sign that Christians don’t really believe these verses is that when they are in the midst of a trial I rarely see them rejoicing.

This is why I’m saying what I’m saying. Here we have a passage of Scripture that exhorts God’s people to rejoice in every trial. And yet when we suffer, in our best moments we might accept our trial, and we might cope well, but we rarely feel or express joy. And that’s why I wonder whether this is a passage many of us really believe? Do you?

### **2. What The Passage Actually Says.**

Well, in order to answer that question we better take a look at what the passage actually says.

Verse 1 introduces us to the letter we're beginning to read today and which we'll explore together over the next few weeks. It's written by James, quite probably the blood brother of Jesus although we can't be one hundred percent sure. He calls himself a servant<sup>1</sup> of God and a servant of his brother Jesus- that's quite striking, isn't it? And he refers to his readers as 'the twelve tribes scattered amongst the nations'. No doubt his intention was to see his letter do the rounds amongst Christian churches in various places. And his readers are the twelve tribes because they're God's people. The Old Testament Israelites were made up of twelve tribes. And it's likely that the early Christian churches had many Jewish people within them. But they would've included Gentiles as well who were also part of the new covenant people of God- members of the twelve tribes in a less literal sense. And as the letter might suggest, these 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians may've been under a lot of pressure because of their faith in Jesus.

#### **vv.2-4**

But whatever their circumstances may've been, James wants to start his letter by talking to his readers about how they respond to trials. And, as you know, he calls on them to consider it pure joy- whenever they face trials of many kinds. But he doesn't just give them that command. He also gives them a reason. And the reason is because of what God is doing in their lives through their trials. Verses 3-4.

[Read 1:3-4]

When we suffer God grows perseverance in us. And the work of perseverance within us is the development of maturity in Christ. Perseverance brings us to completion. And when we are complete we will lack nothing. That's a famous phrase isn't it? Do you remember the start of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm- 'The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing'. This is what God the shepherd does for his people. He meets their every need. Every need. And what James is telling us that one of the way God shepherds us in this direction, is by testing our faith with trials.

I hope you can see the flow chart in your mind here: trials, tested faith, learnt perseverance, spiritual maturity, complete fulfillment- the satisfaction of every need. What God does in these verses is to plainly reveal his purposes to us. He acknowledges the painful journey but he also assures us of the perfect destination. And he lovingly explains that the pain of the journey is actually integral to the fulfilment of his purpose. Let me say that again so you don't miss it. The pain of the journey is actually integral to the fulfilment of his purpose.

And this is why in every trial, we should consider it pure joy. Because through every trial the Good Shepherd is working to give to us the best gift we could possibly receive. Maturity in his son. A life in which we do not lack anything. That's good isn't it?

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<sup>1</sup> Literally 'slave'

## vv.5-8

But, of course, the life of full completeness is our sure hope but not our present experience. In the present time, we do lack things. And one of the things we often lack is wisdom- especially when we're trying to navigate our trials. So James suggests we respond to that lack in the way we'd be wise to respond to every lack- with prayer. Verse 5.

[Read 1:5-8]

Verse 5 really does contain a stunning promise. If experiencing joy in the midst of trials seems out of reach to you, here's what you do. Once again God lays things out for us very plainly here. This is what you do. You pray that God would give you wisdom. And he will give it. Categorically. You ask. You receive. Why? Because of the kind of God we pray to. The God who gives generously to all without finding fault. He's the kind of Good Shepherd who answers prayer without any reduction in willingness because of how sinful the people are who pray the prayers. That's good news isn't it? I've often heard Christians wonder whether God is unlikely to hear their prayers because they continue to let him down. James couldn't be clearer about the fact that that's simply not how God works. No- he gives generously without finding fault. And if you're, like me, a regular sinner who also wants to be a regular pray-er, then this is really great news!

But. There is a qualification here isn't there? God encourages sinful Christians to pray no matter how sinful they are, and to be confident that he will receive them generously. However, there is a kind of person who should not have the same confidence. This is a person who really isn't sure whether they want to follow Jesus or whether they want to follow the ways of the world. This is a person with a foot in both camps. James calls them 'double-minded'<sup>2</sup>. I don't think James is talking here about the kinds of doubts many of us experience often in our faith, or even the doubts we sometimes feel about whether God will answer our prayers. Rather, he's talking about the kind of double-mindedness that doubts whether we really want what God offers us. This is not the doubt of the person who wonders whether God really will give wisdom, but the doubt of the person who wonders whether they really want to be wise. So, if you're not sure you want God's wisdom, James says, then you can't be sure God will give it. But, if you believe that God's wisdom is a precious gift, and if you ask him for it, then you can be certain that God will supply what you lack.

## vv.9-11

And this line of thought leads James to say something else as well. Because he's just been talking about the difference between the person who has their heart set on following Jesus, and the person who has a foot in both camps. He's been talking about

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<sup>2</sup> See also 4:8

the person who really isn't sure whether the wisdom of God is such a precious commodity. And so, in verses 9-11 he contrasts the preciousness of worldly wealth with the wealth that Jesus offers those who live in his family. He reminds the materially poor Christians that in Christ they couldn't be richer! The world may see you as lowly, he says, but you have a high position in God's kingdom. And then he reminds the materially wealthy Christians that their humility in Jesus is more valuable than all the money they have in the bank. Earthly riches fade away. But heavenly riches last forever.

### **v.12**

Which leads him to what he says in verse 12.

[Read 1:12]

Here is a treasure that doesn't wither in the heat. It will never fade away. And this is the blessing that comes to the person who learns to persevere<sup>3</sup> through their trials. This is the blessing for those who love God more than they love the world. And once again, we're told it's a promise. Those who love God, those who surrender to his work in them, those who are glad to have the Good Shepherd lead them, they will be blessed forever. They will receive the crown of life. And when you wear that crown you lack nothing.

And this is such an important perspective {as Psalm 73 reminded us which Tamara read before}. Because this whole passage is an invitation to value what God gives us more than we value the things the world offers. Just as we value spiritual wealth over worldly wealth, so we're called to value spiritual maturity over the comfort of a life without trials. Do you see how verses 9-12 are connected to verses 2-4? If you value what the world values you'll never understand why God would let you suffer through pain. Because the world values comfort over spiritual growth. But the values of God's kingdom are completely different. In God's kingdom it's better to have the crown of life than to be rich and famous. In God's kingdom it's better to be wise than to keep your options open. In God's kingdom, it's better to be growing through pain than living without pain.

James wants us to think about what we treasure. He reminds us that God's values and the values of the world around us are radically different. And so he tells us that until we value what God wants to give us, we'll never believe this passage. It just won't make sense to us! Until we see God's gifts as supremely precious we'll never find joy in trials.

### **vv.13-15**

And there's one more important clarification James wants to make as well. Because what's obvious from the passage so far is that James thinks God is sovereign over everything. These verses are heavy with that assumption. God is the king who gives

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<sup>3</sup> The same word as in 1:3

wisdom. God is the Lord who humbles the exalted and exalts the humble. God is the sovereign one who works through all the events of life to grow his people. And God is the one who will still be reigning when everything else passes away.

So, if God is sovereign, if he rules over everything, if, in a sense, everything comes from him, then does that mean that sin comes from him as well? This is the question James answers in verses 13-15.

[Read 1:13-15]

James insists that you need to understand God's holiness as well as God's sovereignty. He is set apart from all evil. Evil never overcomes him, and it never comes from him. This is why when people are tempted<sup>4</sup> to sin they should never blame God for it. Sin doesn't originate with God but in the desires of the human heart. Of course, because God is sovereign he can work even through sin. But he is never its source. He is not, and cannot ever be, evil.

### **vv.16-18**

He is the opposite. He is entirely good. And that's the assertion with which James finishes the chapter. Verses 16-18 are all about the goodness of God.

[Read 1:16-18]

If evil in the world rises up from inside the human heart, every good gift in the world comes down to us from heaven. Rain, sun, shelter, friendship, chocolate, laughter, sex, exercise, intelligence, beauty. The list could go on and on. It all comes from his hand. And we can count on these good gifts continuing to come because he does not change. He is not like shifting shadows. More literally the original says, there is no shadow of turning with him. And now you know where that line comes from in the hymn 'Great Is Thy Faithfulness': Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father; There is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not; As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.'

This is the changeless generosity of the Good Shepherd. And it has been proven once and for all by his grace in Jesus. This is why James ends with verse 18. Do you ever question the goodness of God? Then remember this. If you're a Christian it's because Christ's gospel gave you rebirth to new life and elevated you to pride of place in all creation, resurrected as a foretaste of the resurrection to come.

And this theme in verses 16-18 is actually the key theme of this whole passage. The goodness of God. Verse 4- he is the one who ultimately brings us to a life in which we

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<sup>4</sup> This is the same word in the Greek here as the word for 'trial' in verse 2 and in verse 12. However, I think he uses the word slightly differently (and more specifically here)- as the NIV translation suggests. I suspect he sees temptation as a unique kind of trial.

lack nothing. Verse 5- he is the one who gives generously without finding fault, and who promises to give wisdom to all who sincerely seek it. Verse 12- he is the one who promises the unfading crown of life to all who love him as he has loved them. Verses 13-15- he is the one so good that he has never been tempted by evil and who never tempts others with evil. Verse 17- he is the one who showers his people with good gifts consistently and abundantly. Verse 18- he is the one who pours out his life-giving grace on all who trust his son.

And why is the goodness of God so important in this passage? Because it is the ground of our trust and the source of our joy. In the midst of painful trials, you cannot surrender to God's good purposes unless you trust him. Believing this passage is impossible unless you trust God unreservedly. And it's only when you trust him that you can rejoice in him- even in trials. If you asked James to tell you in just a few words how on earth it is possible to rejoice in the midst of trials, he would say this: the goodness of God. That's really what this passage is about.

### 3. Why We Find It Hard To Believe It.

So, then, if we have a good working understanding of what James is really saying, then why do we find it hard to believe it? [Pause] And why must we believe it? These are the two things I want to finish with this morning/evening.

Firstly, why do we find it hard to believe?

In part I think it's because we have not allowed the Scriptures to inform our expectations. We so often expect life to be basically good and comfortable. We see sickness, and sadness as the exception rather than the rule. We count on being happy and avoiding pain. So it catches us off guard when it comes. And once again this is because we've allowed ourselves to think like comfortable Sydney-siders think. But in God's economy, the only way we'd go through life without pain and suffering is if he stopped caring about us, if he ceased to be concerned for our maturity and completeness. If trials are integral to his work in us, then we need to expect trials to be a normal part of life.

But of course, the main reason we find this so hard to embrace is because our trials are often just so painful. And when you're in the middle of pain, it's often hard to think about anything other than how to relieve that pain. And of course that's normal. I get it. That's my experience as well as yours. And God gets it too. When relationships break down it's excruciatingly painful. When someone we love dies it can feel like we're drowning in sorrow. When we have to face up to our own frailty and sin it can be deeply oppressive. When we're sick or have reasons to worry about our health it can be hard to think of anything else. When we are anxious about someone we care about, or when they're hurting and we're hurting with them, we often just want it to end. Again, the list could go on. And James isn't asking us to adopt some kind of stoic stiff-upper-lip approach to life, or to pursue some kind of denial or emotional repression. To be joyful in the midst of trials does not mean we enjoy trials. We face them head on. We are

honest about the pain we feel. We long intensely for better days. We pray with earnestness. And yet, what James does ask us to do is remember the work of God in the midst of our trials, and to rejoice in what God produces in us through them.

#### 4. Why We Must Believe It.

There may, in fact, be many reasons why we find it hard to believe what James tells us in this passage. And your reasons may be different to mine. But I want to finish with three reasons why we must believe it.

Number 1- because of the obvious benefit to us and the people around us. As always, God's commands are only ever for our good. And the exhortation of James 1:2 is no different. If like me you've had that rare experience of talking to a Christian who is rejoicing in the middle of a trial you'll know how beautiful and edifying it is. You'll know how refreshing it is to be around them. And you'll know how even their unspoken joy has a way of realigning our own values and leading our heart into the same kind of trust they exhibit.

And don't you think that such a person's experience of their trial will itself be very different from the experience of someone who meets their suffering with despair or bitterness or rage? Wouldn't you like to be like that person who endures their pain and feels its sharpness but who also endures it with contented joy in their hearts- the joy that comes from resting in the Good Shepherd's hands? Wouldn't you like to be like Jesus himself- who endured even his great suffering, as Hebrews says, 'for the joy set before him'<sup>5</sup>?

This is a choice we can actually make. Did you notice that James says we should 'consider' it pure joy? This isn't something that just mysteriously happens to us. It's something we can actually choose. So if you're in a trial right now, or if there's a trial for you just around the corner- will you choose joy? Will you decide to consider it pure joy? For your own sake? And for the sake of your sisters and brothers?

But number 2, will you also make this choice for the sake of people around you who don't yet know Jesus? This is the second reason why we must believe this passage- because of the opportunity it presents to bear witness to the world. Nothing speaks to the radical values of the kingdom quite like a Christian who rejoices in God even in their trials. When we choose joy even in the midst of pain, we communicate very clearly that Jesus is better than our comfort. When we choose joy in suffering we demonstrate what he is really worth, how trustworthy he really is. When we are joyful in a way that confounds people's expectations we point them, arrestingly, to the life-changing goodness of God.

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<sup>5</sup> See Hebrews 12:1-3

{One of my friends has recently been diagnosed with cancer. Of course, she feels fear, and uncertainty, and her fair share of sadness. But she trusts her Heavenly Father in a striking way. And she is choosing joy. You can hear it in her voice every time she speaks. And pretty much the only thing she has said to me in recent weeks by way of frustration is her regret that she didn't tell her oncologist about the reason for her calm heart. She sees the opportunity for her joyful trust to show others the merits of her Saviour. And I suspect many around her will see exactly that through her.}

But we finish with number 3. And this is the most basic reason why we must believe this passage. It's because everything James says here is true. The kingdom is more precious than anything the world has to offer. Maturity in Christ is better than living a comfortable life. God does give the kind of wisdom that makes joy possible even while we ache. And we do have a reason to trust with joy because God is good. He is stunningly and endlessly good.

Did you notice how verse 16 started? Don't be deceived. James, you see, knows how possible that is. He knows that the world can easily deceive us into thinking that it'd be better to live in ease than to grow in maturity through suffering. He knows that Satan has been seeking to deceive people from the very beginning about the goodness of God. Right back in the Garden of Eden Satan urged Eve to question whether God was really seeking her best interests. And he's been urging that question on people every day since. The Evil One loves to deceive us about this. He loves us doubting the goodness of God. He loves us being unsure about whether we can really trust God enough to suffer in surrender. He loves us thinking that joy in trials doesn't really make sense. So this is why James pleads with us. And with his words, I plead with you today/tonight. Don't be deceived my dear brothers and sisters.

Of course, there is a time to cry out to God and to ask 'how long O Lord'. The Bible certainly dignifies lament as a proper way for us to express our griefs in the midst of suffering. But I see no Biblical justification for us ever being angry with God about our sufferings.

Of course, suffering will often take us by surprise because we don't know what tomorrow will bring. But at the same time we must learn to expect trials to come. And we must learn to expect God to use them for our good and his glory.

Of course we may well ask God why our particular suffering has come our way. But we should only ever ask that question knowing that God has already given us an answer- at least in general terms. James answers that question right here. God brings us into suffering because he loves us too much to leave us as we are. He uses our trials to bless us- to grow us in the kind of perseverance that matures us and leads us towards that day when we will want for nothing. So we should always, humbly and gladly, consider it pure joy when the trials come.

And I say this to myself as much as to you. I long for the day when I might look around at the Christians I know and be able to say that I see much joy in the face of many trials. I long to be able to say that this is something we don't just believe in theory but which we live out in practice day by day and year by year. I long for the day when unbelievers all over this city might be caused to consider Christ because of the distinctive way they so often see Christians suffer. I long for the day when the Christians I know do so much more than accept their suffering, when they're not content simply to "cope well", but when they overflow with joy no matter what the Lord brings. And I long for this to be true of me. I hope you will pray this for me as I pray it for you. And I hope you will hold me to account for this as well. When the next great trial of my life comes, no matter how painful it might be, please remind me that God is so good, and so trustworthy, that I can joyfully rest in him.

This is the heart of the issue you see. When I say we this is a passage that so few of us really believe, I don't really mean that we fail to believe we should be joyful in our trials. What I really mean is that we fail to believe God really is as good as James says he is. If we believed that, if we believed deeply and resolutely in the generous goodness of God, then joy would never be far from us! And this is why this sermon is not an exhortation to you to believe something hard or demanding, but an exhortation to believe something amazing, and sweet, and true. The goodness of God. The goodness of God that is the grounds of our trust and the source of our joy. And it's about this, above all, that we must not be deceived. Don't let the world fool you. Don't let Satan con you. Don't be deceived my dear brothers and sisters. The Good Shepherd really is this good. So good that you can be sure he will never bring you pain that won't turn into blessing. So good that one day you really will lack nothing. Nothing! So good that he will give you enough wisdom to face every complex moment. So good that even your trials should be seen as good and perfect gifts from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. And there is no shadow of turning with him. Great is His Faithfulness. Great is His Faithfulness.

Pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds. Really? James says, he really is that good. He really is. Do you believe it?

[Read 1:16-18]

## QUESTION TIME