

The Trial of Your Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Well, would you turn with me this evening to the letter of James, the letter of James, in chapter 1. James chapter 1, and we're reading the first 11 verses.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, for he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass, he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat, and withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

And so on. And so we're continuing our study of the letter of James. And as we said before, the letter of James is to be considered as a handbook to the Christian life. It's a handbook to the Christian life, because James's greatest concern is not for information, but for application.

He wants us to be able to apply the gospel, the gospel we love and cherish in our hearts. He wants us to apply it in our lives, and live out our Christianity in a practical way. And just as opposed, just to briefly recap on what we saw the last time. We asked three questions. We first of all asked who, who was James, and we discovered that he was the younger brother of Jesus. Then we asked why, why did James write his letter? And we said that James was writing his letter to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith, and they had been displaced, or as it says there, they had been part of the dispersion. They had been scattered outside the land of Palestine.

[2 : 5 8] But then we also asked, what? What does James want to teach us? And because these persecuted Christians had been dispersed and driven out of their homes, well, we said before that there were no real structures or structures in place to disciple them. Because their faith was new, and their conversion was recent, and their love for the Lord was strong, and they had been dispersed outside the boundaries of the Holy Land of Israel. And they were living in, you could say, a Gentile country, and it was a hostile environment. And because of their lack of discipleship and the lack of teaching, there were lots of issues in the church. There were issues of worldliness, temptation, there was gossip, there was pride, there was jealousy. But as we saw last time, the root cause of it all, it all boiled down to immaturity. It all boiled down to immaturity. They were immature in their faith, and they needed to grow up.

And so the message of James to the churches was simple and straightforward. It was just, grow up. Because he says to them, yes, you have faith. And you have faith in Jesus Christ, and that's good.

It's wonderful to know that you have faith in Jesus Christ, but your faith needs to progress. Your faith needs to mature. Your faith needs to be a faith that works. It can't just be a faith of theory.

It must be a faith of practice. It needs to be a faith that works. It needs to be a faith which is lived out in your community and in the surroundings that you're part of. That's the kind of faith you need, a faith that works. But as we move into James's letter, the first thing James says about the faith of the Christian is that it's a faith that will be tested. Because if your faith is genuine, then your faith will be tested. And James says that you need a faith that works because the Christian life is not an easy road. And this is a recurring theme throughout the letter of James. But in the opening section here, in verses 1 to 11, James draws attention to the fact that there will be trials in the Christian life.

And he does this not to cause us to worry or to be filled with anxiety that we can't fulfill our duty as a Christian. Instead, James seeks to encourage us as Christians and remind us that when it comes to the trial of our faith, God has a plan and God has a purpose in it. And that's what I'd like us to see from this passage. God has a plan and God has a purpose. Because when we look at this passage, we can actually divide it into three sections and we can just look at them under three different headings. So in verses 2 to 4, it's the purpose of trials. In verses 5 to 8, it's the perspective of trials. And in verses 9 to 11, it's the product of trials. Verses 2 to 4, the purpose of trials. Verses 5 to 8, the perspective of trials. And verses 9 to 11, the product of trials. So we look firstly at the purpose of trials. Verses 2 to 4, the purpose of trials look at verse 2 James says count it all joy my brother when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing and so after his introduction in verse 1 the first two words that James writes in the original language in verse 2 are the words all joy or literally the words mean pure joy in the sense of untainted joy but what may cause us some confusion is that the last two words of the same sentence in verse 2 they are the words various trials so the first two words are all joy the last two words are various trials and immediately in our minds there seems to be a contradiction because how can a

[7 : 32] Christian or anyone in this life ever consider a trial of any description whatever it is how can they consider it a pure joy how can we equate the two things together how can we ever consider trials that we are faced with in our life how can we consider them a joy and James isn't specific he doesn't speak about specific kinds of trials and he does that for a specific reason because trials as you know they can come in all sorts of ways and through all sorts of means it doesn't just have to be persecution many of these Jewish believers to whom James was writing they were not only being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ but they were also experiencing poverty they were experiencing physical and verbal abuse they were enduring sickness loneliness bereavement and disappointment their trials were of various kinds just like the trials of every Christian they come in various ways and at various times and there are various kinds of trials and yet and yet James says that we should consider all these trials a pure joy he says that we should consider the trials in our life which stretch our faith and sometimes tear our home apart and even bring us to breaking point and yet James says consider it a pure joy and you know I look at this sentence that in my mind doesn't actually make sense because if James I was thinking about this if James was in front of me right now I'd be tempted to ask him have you got any idea what you're talking about have you not got any compassion do you understand what you're asking because how can anyone ever consider the trials they are faced with in their life how can they consider them a joy how can they consider them a joy surely these words shouldn't be in the same paragraph let alone the same sentence

James how can the Christian consider their trial as a pure joy well of course James isn't saying that if you're a Christian and you have Jesus in your heart that whatever comes your way in life you should always have a smile on your face he's not saying that the Christian should be joyful all the time and free from sadness and sorrow and somehow numb to all the heartbreaks and the setbacks of life because we believe that God is in control of course that's not what James is saying but what James is saying is that as a Christian we should consider every trial of our faith whatever it may be we should consider it as a pure joy because God has a purpose in it God has a purpose in it we should consider our trials a pure joy not because of what we are going through but because we know that God is working through our trial

God is working in us in our trial because he has a purpose in all our trials of faith and this is what should bring rejoicing in the midst of a trial that every trial no matter how dark and how perplexing and how confusing and how heartbreaking they can be James wants to remind us that they're all part of God's plan and God's purpose in our lives because my friend James is convinced that the suffering which the Lord's people encounter in this world it's all under the providential care and control of the Lord who wants the best for his people we may not be able to see it at the time we may not understand why it's all taking place but what James wants to encourage us with is that the Lord has a purpose in it all and the Lord's purpose is to bring us on to maturity the Lord's purpose is to bring us on to maturity and that's what James says in verse 3 he says for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing and we mentioned last time that James uses the word perfect he uses it time and time again throughout his letter we'll come across it but he's not using the word perfect in the sense of being sinless he's using the word perfect in the sense of maturing and growing in your faith because James wants us to know that as Christians God's purpose in our lives is to make us perfect men and women who will have an impact upon a fallen world but in these verses James not only states

God's purpose in bringing various trials into our lives he also highlights the process because there is a process where the trial of our faith produces perseverance and perseverance produces perfection it produces maturity and that's what James is drawing our attention to that God is working in and through all the trials in our life and as he does it according to his purpose his purpose in our trials is to produce perseverance and perseverance is to produce perfection it's to produce maturity and so the reason James says that we are to consider our trial as a pure joy is because God is working in us to produce perseverance it's not so much as it is their steadfastness or patience as it's translated in the AV but the word perseverance perseverance perseverance perseverance I suppose for the sake of clarity if we were to translate these verses literally this is the literal translation it says my brothers consider it a pure joy when you endure various trials because when you realize that the testing of your faith produces perseverance the work of perseverance will continue to have a maturing hold on your life in order to bring you on to maturity that you may be complete lacking nothing but you know what I find so interesting about the language which James uses here what he uses the language about God's purpose in our trials is that it's the same language which Jesus used in the parable of the sower you'll remember in the parable of the sower that when the sower went out into his field to sow the seed there was nothing wrong with the sower there was nothing wrong with the seed but the result of the seed depended upon the type of soil that the seed landed on and in the parable we're told that some seed fell by the wayside some seed fell on the rocky ground some fell among the thorns and some fell into the good ground but when Jesus explains the parable of the sower the language of James comes to life because if you were to read Luke's gospel you can do it when you go home in Luke's gospel in chapter 8 the account of the parable of the sower

Jesus' explanation it reads now the parable is this the seed is the word of God those by the wayside are the ones who hear then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts lest they should believe and be saved but the ones on the rock are those who when they hear receive the word with joy and these have no root who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away now the ones that fell among the thorns are those who when they have heard go out and are choked with cares riches and pleasures of life and bring no fruit on to maturity but the ones that fell on the good ground are those who having heard the word with a noble and good heart keep it and bear fruit with patience or with perseverance and what Jesus was saying was that when the seed fell by the wayside nothing happened it was easy food for the birds but when the seed fell onto the rocky ground there was a response there was joy there was faith but that faith soon disappeared when the trials came and when the seed fell among the thorns there was growth there were signs of life but the cares of the world the deceitfulness of riches and the pleasures of this life choked the seed and the result was that there was no fruit which was the evidence of maturity but Jesus says that the seed which fell into the good ground the seed that fell into the good ground it's the person who heard the word with joy and even in times of trial they kept a hold of the precious word of God and with the temptation from the cares of the world the deceitfulness of riches the pleasures of this life the good seed still went on to maturity by bearing fruit through perseverance and so in view of the parable of the sower when we consider what James is saying he's encouraging the Christian in the midst of their trials to see that because the seed which was sown in your heart because it hasn't been taken away from you because you haven't fallen away because of trials because you haven't been overwhelmed by the cares and the deceitfulness of riches and the pleasures of this world you should consider it a pure joy to know that a good seed has fallen in good ground you should consider it a joy to know that with every trial you are persevering to cling on to the word of God and the God of that word and that ought to be a confirmation and an assurance to the genuineness of your faith and that God has a purpose in your trial

[18 : 38] God is working in and through your experience so that you will bear fruit some thirtyfold some sixtyfold some a hundredfold my friend God has a purpose in trials but secondly James reminds us of the perspective of trials the perspective of trials if you look at verse 5 he says if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him but let him ask in faith with no doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind for that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord he is a double-minded man unstable in all his ways and so after reminding the Christians that God has a purpose in our trials James stresses the need to have the right perspective of our trials because James knows that for the Christian trials will come he says consider it a pure joy when various trials come it's not if but when but here James draws attention to our perspective of trials because sometimes we can have the wrong perspective of our trials that when God brings difficulties and hardships and heartache into our lives he does it for a purpose it's to bring us on to maturity but that purpose can only be achieved if we have the right perspective and respond to God in the right manner and that's why James says if you lack wisdom ask God because he gives generously without finding fault without reproach and the reason James highlights God's grace and God's generosity and the fact that that God doesn't find fault with us is because when we lack wisdom we are acting like the fool when we lack wisdom we're not seeing things from God's perspective when we lack wisdom we are refusing to accept that God has a purpose putting this trial into our life when we lack wisdom we can become frustrated with God and blame God and question God and even doubt that God knows what he's doing but James affirms to us that when we lack wisdom we're acting like the fool and we might think well that's a harsh way of putting it but it's not meant to be because the contrast between wisdom and folly it not only seeks to highlight the importance of having wisdom but it's stressing that well if you fall into folly that's the wrong way to go you have to have wisdom and as we said before the letter of James it's been likened to the New Testament equivalent of the book of Proverbs and the book of Proverbs it's a book all about wisdom and folly in which it repeatedly contrasts the wise person with the foolish person and the emphasis of the book of Proverbs it can be summed up in one statement the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and that's what James is drawing our attention to fearing the Lord and having the Lord's perspective of our trials is the beginning of wisdom it's the beginning of maturity and anything else he says is foolishness but let's not think that it's unheard of to lack wisdom and let's not beat ourselves up and tear ourselves apart over the fact that we struggle to see things from God's perspective let's not make our trials worse thinking that we're so weak and so useless when we endure trials let's not go down that road because that's not what James wants us to do instead James wants to give us the remedy to our lack of wisdom to our lack of perspective because he assures us that God is gracious and God is generous and God doesn't hold anything against us because of our faults or our lack of wisdom or our lack of faith no he says God is more than willing to help us and sustain us and keep us and uphold us and affirm to us his promises all we have to do is ask that's what James says ask God it's an imperative it's a command ask God who gives graciously and generously and again we can see that James is drawing upon the teaching of Jesus because if you remember in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said ask and it will be given to you seek and you will find knock and it will be opened to you and in that statement

Jesus wasn't calling the unconverted to repentance he's encouraging the Christian to come to the throne of grace and receive from him every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ because Jesus says that everyone who asks receives the one who seeks finds and to him who knocks it will be opened and Jesus qualifies his statement by assuring us of the gracious character of our heavenly father because you remember that Jesus went on to ask well what man is there among you who if his son asks for bread will give him a stone or if he asks for a fish he will give him a serpent and Jesus says if you then being evil or literally being full of trial and hardship if you know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will your father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him and so my friend if you're lacking perspective on what you're going through right now then James is encouraging us to ask God for wisdom he's encouraging us to come to God and say help me see your hand in it help me see it from your perspective or as the psalmist had it in Psalm 119 confirm to me thy gracious word which I did gladly hear even to thy servant

Lord who is devoted to thy fear but James doesn't just leave it there because he says in verse 6 but let him ask in faith with no doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind what James indicates to us here is that when we ask God for wisdom we must ask with the right attitude as one commentator puts it he says our asking must coincide with the way in which God gives God gives with singleness of intent therefore we must ask with singleness of intent we must ask in faith without doubting and again we see that James is drawing upon the teaching of Jesus that's what he does throughout his whole letter it's all drawing upon the teaching of Jesus and do you remember not so long ago when we were looking in Mark's gospel in chapter 11

Jesus stressed to his disciples have faith in God have faith in God and he said to them assuredly I say to you whoever says to this mountain be removed and be cast into the sea and does not doubt in his heart but believes that those things he says will be done he will have whatever he says therefore I say to you this is Jesus whatever things you ask when you pray believe that you receive them and you will have them and of course the statement of Jesus has often been twisted by those who preach a false gospel of prosperity they say that God has promised health and wealth to every Christian and if only his or her faith is strong enough if your faith is strong enough God has promised you health and wealth but neither Jesus nor James intends to give Christians a blank check and expect whatever they want from God because whatever you ask it's clearly qualified here by the need for wisdom if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask of God but for both

[27 : 38] Jesus and James the opposite of believing is doubting and we need to understand what James means by doubting because he's not speaking of uncertainty he's speaking of such a lack of faith that you don't ask God at all because there's an element of indecision and the inconsistent attitude towards God there's a wavering of faith and that's what James says in verse 6 let him ask in faith with no doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord he's a double-minded man unstable in all his ways therefore the doubter isn't someone who's asking the Lord for help the doubter is someone who doesn't ask the Lord at all as one commentator put it he said the doubter not possessing an anchor for the soul does not pray to God with a consistency and a sincerity of purpose but James' statement it might leave us with a bit of confusion because if we're asking for wisdom and guidance from the Lord and we don't receive what we're asking for does that mean we're not asking correctly or does it mean that we're not asking in faith no it means that we need to persevere in our asking because even in the act of persevering in asking

God's purpose has been fulfilled as we're going on to maturity the fact that we keep going back to God is God bringing us on to maturity but what about doubting I have doubts does that mean it's wrong and God won't listen to me listen to my prayers until I'm free of all doubts not at all not at all and this is interesting this is just an aside the same word is used by the apostle Paul about the word wavering when James speaks about that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the wave driven of the sea the wavering Paul uses that word in Romans chapter 4 and when Paul is speaking he uses the word when he's speaking about Abraham the man of faith great faith the father of the faithful and Paul says that

Abraham did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God the promise that God would provide Abraham a son and that through Isaac all the nations of the earth would be blessed but Paul's point wasn't that Abraham never entertained any doubt in his mind about God's promise being fulfilled because there were many times when Abraham doubted and tried to do things his own way you remember when Abraham pretended that Sarah was his wife so that they wouldn't get killed well if the Lord was promising a son they weren't going to be killed anyway or the time when Abraham he had a child with Hagar thinking well Ishmael must be the child of promise he was trying his own thing and so we see that there were many times in Abraham's life when he doubted but the point that Paul is making is that over many years Abraham never turned back he left his home and he kept going he never stopped persevering he never gave up on his faith and instead he consistently displayed a desire to follow the

Lord he kept on keeping on and he kept believing the promises no matter how hard it seemed and how hard it may have been for him and that's what James is teaching us here he's not claiming that our prayers won't be answered if we have the slightest bit of doubt in them because doubt is inevitable it's in us all especially when we're experiencing a trial but as we said a trial is not to drive us away from the Lord the trial is always to drive us to the Lord and it's only when we have the right perspective of our trial that we go to God and ask for wisdom to know what to do next and ask for grace to help in time of need because that's what's promised to us that's what's promised to us at the throne of grace grace to help in time of need and so we've considered the purpose of trials that

God has a purpose that is to bring us on to maturity in our faith we've considered the perspective of trials that we need to have God's perspective when it comes to trials and if we don't we're to ask in faith but lastly and very briefly we see the product of trials the product of trials look at verse nine let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation because like a flower of the grass he will pass away for the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass its flower falls and its beauty perishes so also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits and so from what we've considered already we know that the product of trials is to produce in us a maturity in our faith and that maturity is that maturity is carried out by perseverance throughout trials but in these verses James introduces us to a problem which was rife in the early church it was the contrast between the rich and the poor but I don't want to dwell on this topic this evening because

[33 : 58] James will address the subject more fully in chapter 5 but with regards to trials James raises the point that it doesn't matter who we are we all face trials doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor we all endure trials of some description therefore whatever is our social or economic background as Christians James is calling us to look beyond our worldly situation and see God's purpose and see it from God's perspective perspective because the product of a trial and what ought to characterize a Christian is their humility my friend the product of trials is to humbly persevere to the end it's to humbly persevere to the end and you know when I consider anyone in the Bible who underwent trials it was Job in fact James mentions Job in chapter 5 and it's amazing actually what he says about him because James says you have heard of the perseverance of

Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord and how the Lord is compassionate and merciful and that's why we were reading in the book of Job earlier because Job was a man who persevered to the end where he entered into the trial of his life in the first 32 verses of the book the first 32 verses then he spends the next 42 chapters trying to understand why and you know I was thinking well that's sometimes what it can be like for people that in only 32 verses of your life everything changes everything is turned upside down something happens and you can't understand why and you spend the next 42 years or 42 chapters of your life trying to see the Lord's purpose in it and view it from the Lord's perspective perspective but even though Job was a man who feared

God as it said again and again he didn't always understand God's purposes and he didn't always see it from God's perspective that's why his friends were all there giving putting their oar in and giving their own perspective and even though he didn't see it see God's purposes he didn't always see it from God's perspective he did persevere and in his persevering he learned and he grew in his faith and he matured in his faith because Job was a man who knew what it was to be in plenty and he also knew what it was to be in want he knew what it was to be exalted and he knew what it was to be humbled but in his being humbled and in his humility it was then that Job made all those beautiful statements which are dotted throughout his book the memorable statements though he slay me yet will

I trust him for I know that my redeemer liveth but he knows the way that I take and when he has tried me I shall come forth as gold my friend the product of our trials is so that we may be humbled and God may be exalted it's that we may decrease and that he may increase and so we have in these verses the purpose of trials the perspective of trials the product of trials but I just want to close by quoting those beautiful words in 1 Peter what Peter reminds every Christian of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ the opening words of Peter's letter he says that we have an inheritance that is incorruptible undefiled does not fade away because it's being reserved in heaven for us but until then he says until we reach heaven we are to keep persevering because we have the promise that we are being kept by the power of

God through faith unto salvation and it's by reflecting upon our inheritance that Peter says in this you greatly rejoice though now for a season if need be you have been grieved by various trials that the trial of your faith being much more precious than gold that perishes though betrayed by fire might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ this is the wonderful verse whom have he not seen your love in whom though now you see him not yet believing you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory receiving the end of your faith even the salvation of your souls beautiful words my friend keep persevering keep persevering on to the end may the

[39 : 48] Lord bless these thoughts to us let us pray O Lord our gracious God we give thanks to thee that thou art the God who works in us and through us we bless thee O Lord that for the reminder even in thy word that thou art the God who works both to will and to do according to thine own good pleasure and help us to see thine hand in everything help us to see that thou art the God who keeps us who keeps our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even forever more we bless thee O Lord that even in the darkness thou art the God who is still light a God in whom we are able to trust to cast every care upon to cast every burden upon because thou art the one who sustains us O bless us Lord we pray thee remember thy children here encourage them as thy children and thee as their heavenly father bless them we pray thee undertake for us all we ask for we know Lord that these trials in our experience that they are there for a reason but Lord we thank thee that thou art the

God who is not afar off but one who draws near who knows the way that we take and when thou hast tried us we will come forth as gold O do us good then we pray thee bless us in our being together bless us in our parting one from the other that thou would us go with us cleanse us we ask take away our iniquity and receive us graciously for Jesus sake amen we shall conclude by singing in psalm 34 psalm 34 page 248 psalm 34 singing from verse 17 down to the verse 19 psalm 34 from verse 17 the righteous cry unto the Lord he unto them gives ear and they out of their troubles all by him delivered are the

Lord is never ever nigh to them that be of broken spirit to them he safety doth afford that are in heart contrite the troubles that afflict the just in number many be but yet at length out of them all the Lord doth in conclusion to God's praise the righteous cry unto the Lord he unto them gives ear and they out of their troubled soul by him deliver are the Lord is ever nigh to them that be all broken spin to them he saved he doth afford that heart in heart contrite the troubles that afflict the just in number many be but yet a length that of them all the

Lord doth set him free the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever more Amen