

A Faith That Works: The Test of Faith

James 1:1-12

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on June 7, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're starting a new sermon series that's going to carry us through the summer. We're going to go through the book of James. I think it's a fitting follow up to our Proverbs series. **Proverbs is the go-to book of wisdom in the OT. But, in the NT, it's equivalent would be the book of James.**
 - In many ways, it reads like Proverbs. Unlike the other letters in the NT, there is less of a clear structure. Outlining the book is a bit of a challenge. **It's like Proverbs in the way it moves from topic to topic and focuses on practical living.** On taking the wisdom of Scripture and applying it to daily experiences.
 - So, since our practice is to alternate our sermon series between books in the OT and the NT, we thought we might as well maintain the emphasis on wisdom literature and make a smooth transition between Proverbs and James.
- ❖ I'm excited about preaching through James. **I assume you are too since James is a favorite book of the Bible for many Christians.** But it's not for all though. Martin Luther famously called it an "epistle of straw" because of what James writes in chapter 2 about being justified by faith alone and how it seems to contradict Paul. We'll certainly tackle that sticky theological issue when we get there.
 - But I have a personal reason for being excited to preach James, especially today's passage. **James 1:1-12 was the passage of the first sermon I ever preached.** When I was seventeen and part of the youth group in this church, I was asked to be the student preacher at the end-of-year youth service. **That was quite a trial for me. To be honest, I'm not sure if I counted that experience all joy.** I had never been more nervous in my life. Standing on this very stage in the youth center, with messy handwritten notes that had been worked over multiple times. I'm so glad it was so long ago that there's no digital evidence that it ever took place.
- ❖ Apparently, God knew what he was doing putting me through that trial. Little did I know then – standing on a stage with knees knocking – that decades later I would be back on the same stage preaching the same Word of God. **There was no way I could've known, in that moment, what God has purposed for that trial. I didn't know he was forging a preacher.**
 - And that's the point of our passage. That God has a purpose for our pain. He has a reason for the difficult trials that he puts us through. We don't worship a distant, disengaged God unaware of the challenges we face. And neither do we worship a capricious, whimsical God who cares less about our pain.
 - **No, we worship a sovereign, wise, and loving God who purposefully places particular trials along your path – knowing exactly what challenges you need to face and what pain you need to experience – in order to become the person he has purposed you to be.**
- ❖ And, of course, we are living in a time and place where trials are ever present. This pandemic has prolonged and has had devastating effects – hundreds of thousands have died and many more have suffered physical and economic pain.

- ❖ **And right now, our African-American neighbors, including our brothers and sisters in Christ, are going through an infuriating, frustrating trial** – sparked by yet another senseless, unjust killing of a black man while being detained by police officers. There is so much pain and anger being expressed on the streets of America.
 - And it’s because there’s nothing new about this trial, about the systemic mistreatment of blacks in our nation. The only thing new is the smartphone in the hands of every bystander and the ability of videos to go viral. Racism is centuries old. That’s why so many feel helpless and hopeless. Will things ever change? Will this trial ever end?

- ❖ **Church, one of the fundamental issues you’ll need to face – if you expect to persevere in the faith – is the problem of pain.** If you have no answer to why God allows us to suffer – why he has us go through trials in life – if you don’t know how to answer your neighbor who’s in pain, then how will you withstand the day of your own trials – when the trials that God has purposed for your life arrive at your door?
 - Thankfully, we’re looking at one of the key passages in Scripture that speaks to the topic of trials, to the problem of pain. **In these verses, we see there is an answer, but to rightly understand the purpose of our trials, we need to rightly respond.**
 - Like you’d expect in wisdom literature, James immediately calls his readers to respond – to practically live out our faith, to rightly respond to trials. We’ll see in our passage that, if we hope to withstand trials, we’ll need the right attitude, the right wisdom, and the right perspective.

The Right Attitude to Withstand Trials

- ❖ Our passage begins with the right attitude that we’ll need in order to withstand our trials. Notice how the letter begins a consideration. It begins, in v2, telling us to count or to consider something. And the fact that we have to be commanded to make this consideration implies that it’s not our instinctive response.
 - **Our first impression would not be to consider the occasion of a trial as a cause for rejoicing. That’s not our reflexive attitude.** That’s why we need to be commanded to have a new attitude. Let me read v2, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*”

- ❖ **The first attitude we need to adjust is our shock when trials do show up in life. We need to accept their inevitability.** Notice how James says to count it all joy *when* you meet trials – not *if* you happen to. It’s an issue of when – not whether.
 - You have to accept that being Christians – being in God’s good favor through the blood and righteousness of Christ – in no way exempts us from the experience of trials. **God never promises to protect us from the experience of suffering – but to preserve us when we go through suffering.**
 - So don’t be shocked by trials. Peter says the same thing to his readers in 1 Peter 4:12, “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*”

- ❖ **Now James doesn't tell us the exact nature of the trials his readers were facing.** We do know, according to v1, that he's writing a general letter to Christians with a Jewish background, specifically to those dispelled from Israel and scattered throughout the Roman Empire because of persecution that arose in Jerusalem. Notice how he addresses his letter, *"To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion."* The Dispersion is a reference to that scattering.
 - So, because these Christians were displaced from their homes so abruptly by persecution, they left behind their wealth. Their trials likely involved poverty. There are multiple references in the letter to poor Christians (1:9-11; 2:1-7; 2:15-17). But while it's helpful to know the particular trials they were going through, the fact that James is calling us to rejoice *"when we meet trials of various kinds"* – suggests that it doesn't matter if your trial doesn't particularly match the trials of his original readers.
 - No matter what you're facing – be it poverty, persecution, sickness, death, bereavement, or alienation due to dislocation (a common experience for immigrants) – no matter the kind of trial, they're occasions for rejoicing.

- ❖ Joy is the particular attitude that James is calling for. But note very carefully that he's not telling us to rejoice in the trial itself. **Notice how he says to rejoice when you meet trials. So it's for the occasion of experiencing a trial – not for the trial itself.**
 - That's important to stress. The trial itself can be a horrific, evil thing. A deadly pandemic is not a source of joy in itself. Police brutality is not a cause for rejoicing in itself. Your physical pain or financial distress is not a blessing in itself. You can grieve these things. You can lament and express your sorrow to God and God's people.
 - **When James says to count that occasion "all joy", he's referring to the pure quality of that joy and not to the exclusivity of joy.** As if that were the only feeling you should have. No, it's legitimate to feel a wide range of emotions when you face trials – from sadness to grief to anger.

- ❖ James is not suggesting that there should be no other emotional response other than joy, but he is saying that trials are an occasion for genuine, pure rejoicing. And this is no lighthearted, superficial joy. **No, James is talking about a deep-rooted joy that keeps you grounded and stable even when storms are raging out of control in your life.**
 - There could be a category-5 hurricane raging on the surface of the Atlantic, but directly underneath, two miles down in the deep, deep bottom of the ocean – everything's calm. That's the kind of joy we're talking about. **Surface-level joy will be blown away if the storm in your life gets big enough. But a deep-rooted joy is sustained (and sustains you!) even when a storm is raging on the surface.**

- ❖ *But how can a Christian have that kind of joy when facing trials? It's by recognizing God's purpose behind the occasion of that trial.* Listen to vv3-4, *"³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*

- ❖ **The point here is that God’s purpose in testing us with trials is intended to perfect our faith and to make us more mature in Christ.** It’s a consistent theme found in the NT when it comes to the purpose of trials (cf. Rom 5:3-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7). These trials are a test of faith.
 - Now the word for “test” here is found in one other place in the NT – in 1 Peter 1:7. Listen starting in v6, *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

- ❖ **Trials are a crucible in which the genuineness of your faith is revealed. It’s analogous to refining gold.** Imagine you stumble across a fist-size, unrefined ore of gold and think you hit it rich. But just wait. Take it to a goldsmith first, and he’ll put that ore of gold into a crucible, and then he’ll thrust it into a blazing hot furnace. And he’ll let the fire do its work.
 - The flames will test that fist-size rock. To see what’s real. And after you pull it out, don’t be surprised to see something much smaller than you put in. **The fire burned away the dross – all that was not gold was consumed.**
 - And that's what trials do. **They test our faith in Christ by burning away impurities.** By melting away our sinful, selfish tendencies and the remnants of unbelief in our hearts. Trials have a way of purifying our faith.

- ❖ **But they don’t just make our faith purer – they make it stronger.** James says the *“testing of your faith produces steadfastness”*. That could be translated as perseverance, fortitude, or just plain toughness. Your faith needs to be stress-tested. The more your faith is tested, the stronger it gets and the more steadfast you become. The word for “steadfast” literally means to “stand under”. **So, to have steadfastness means you have what it takes to stand up under the pressure of a great trial without letting it crush you.**

- ❖ But to get to that point, v4 says you need to *“let steadfastness have its full effect”*. That means you won’t grow steadfast overnight. It doesn't happen after one trial. When you lift weights for the first time, do you expect to wake up the next morning with ripping biceps?
 - No, that’s not how it works. **Your muscles get stronger only as they face resistance over the course of time.** Over time, if you let lifting weights have its full effect, then results will begin to show. **In the same way, your faith – and overall character – gets stronger the more you go through trials and face resistance.**
 - And for anyone who has ever lifted weights, you know you’re going to feel sore after a hard workout. It’s going to hurt – but it’s a good hurt. You feel good about it. You count it all joy.

- ❖ It’s the same thing when it comes to facing trials. It’s not going to be comfortable. **It’s going to hurt – but it’s a good hurt. Because you know that the end result from all that testing is maturity in Christ.** *“That you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* In other words, the results begin to show – you begin to look more like Jesus. And that’s why you can feel good about meeting trials of various kinds. That’s why you can count it all joy.

- ❖ **Friends, the point here is that you need to respond rightly with the right attitude – that being joy.** Count it all joy – genuinely rejoice at the occasion of meeting trials in life. Which is only possible if you understand and believe in God’s purposes – to refine you, to sanctify you, to make you more like Christ.
 - Remember, you’ve got to let steadfastness have its full effect. **You have to let the trials run their course. Be patient with how long they last or how many you have to face.** Perfecting your faith and completing your sanctification takes time. Like trying to get into shape – there’s no magic pill. There's no short cut.
 - **In the same way, there’s no magic pill for becoming mature in Christ. So don’t try to shortcut God’s means of sanctification.** Accept that he uses trials and count it all joy when you meet them on the pathway of life.

The Right Wisdom to Withstand Trials

- ❖ So we talked about the right attitude we need in order to withstand trials. But we also need the right wisdom. That’s what vv5-8 are about. Let me read v5, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”*
 - **Now initially, the connection between enduring trials and asking God for wisdom may not be as obvious.** Like a lot of wisdom literature, it seems disjointed. But there’s actually good reason why James would go from talking about trials and the testing of our faith to an exhortation to pray for more wisdom.
- ❖ Think about it: **Whenever you’re going through a difficult time, facing a lot of trials, there will always be a number of voices, speaking into your life, trying to help you make sense of the situation, to make sense of your pain.**
 - And some of these voices are going to be helpful and offer you wise counsel. But many of them will confuse you, mislead you, or drive you to greater despair. That’s what happened to our friend Job in the OT.
- ❖ **Job is probably the most relevant book in the Bible when it comes to the problem of pain and the topic of trials.** Job, if you’re not familiar, was a godly man who enjoyed a beautiful, large family and great prosperity and was faithful and very grateful towards God.
 - But the devil told the LORD that, “Job is only faithful because you blessed him. Let me take away those blessings and watch him curse you.” So God let the devil do it – he allowed Job to go through an onslaught of trials that would break the best of us.
 - So the devil took away all of Job’s prosperity and killed all of his kids. He left him with dust and ashes and bitter wife who wished he would just curse God and die. And that’s just chapters 1 and 2.
- ❖ **The remaining 40 chapters of the book introduce us to three friends who try to comfort Job and give him counsel.** They try to help Job make sense of his trials. But in the end, they offer very little wisdom. What you begin to see – as you read about Job and his friends going back and forth trying to make sense of the situation – **you realize that the major theme of the book of Job is not about trials and suffering. It’s about wisdom.**

- ❖ You might not realize it because of the narrative elements in it, but the book of Job falls under the category of OT wisdom books along with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Job is wisdom literature. **So the driving question of the book is not: Why do godly people suffer? The driving question is: Who is truly wise?** All the major characters in the story make claims to possessing wisdom.
 - Satan thinks he knows why people love and serve God (1:9-11). Job's friends think they know how God and his blessings work – if you're good, you're blessed; if you're bad, you're cursed; and the converse is true – if you're not blessed, then you must be bad (4:7-8). And Job, after suffering, now thinks it's all arbitrary; it doesn't matter in the end; the righteous receive the same fate as the wicked (9:22-24). He's exhibit A.

- ❖ **So everyone is claiming to have God and his ways figured out.** Everyone thinks they're wise. But who is truly wise? Where does true wisdom come from? Then we get to Job 28, and there Job poses the question of the book. **In v12, he asks where shall wisdom be found?** And he goes on in v13 to admit that it's not found in the land of the living – meaning among finite creatures like us. In v23, he realizes that, "*God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.*" And then in v28 (arguably the book's key verse) it says, "*Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.*" That sure sounds like wisdom literature.
 - By the end of the book, when God finally speaks, it's clear that God is the Truly Wise One. That he alone possesses true wisdom. **And if Job is to have any chance of withstanding the immense pressure of his trials – he needs true wisdom (right wisdom). He needs the fear of the Lord.**

- ❖ That's the same connection between trials and wisdom here in James. **If we're going to have any chance of withstanding trials like Job, then we also need true wisdom.** And from Job's story, it's clear that having wisdom doesn't mean having all the answers. It doesn't mean fully understanding why God puts us through our trials. In the end, Job never found out. But it didn't matter. **In the end, he found true wisdom. He gained a fear of the Lord.**
 - So when James tells us, in v5, to ask God for wisdom – he's not suggesting that, if you just ask, God is going to give you all the answers and explain exactly why he's putting you through these trials. He didn't do that for Job.
 - But what James *is* suggesting is that if you trust God when you pray – and ask for the right wisdom to withstand your trials – he'll generously give you what you need. **He'll grant you a proper fear of the Lord.**

- ❖ You'll gain a greater reverence for the wisdom of the Truly Wise One that transcends your own. **Like Job, you may never fully understand God's ways, but if you fear him, you can trust in the wisdom of his ways.** You can trust that the trials you're facing are not curses, and they're not arbitrary. **They are carefully crafted tests of faith that inflict purposeful pain to bring about greater growth and maturity.**

- ❖ So pray for this wisdom – this fear of the Lord. Ask in faith and without doubt. That’s what James goes on to say in vv6-8. **There’s more that could be said, but the main point is that God is generous and desirous to give us wisdom – but we need to ask for it.**
 - And you might wonder why? If he wants to give it so badly, why make us ask for it in faith? Why doesn’t he just give us all the wisdom we need? **It’s because if he gave you wisdom apart from the context of faithful prayer – then you would easily become wise in your own eyes.** Faithful prayer is required so that we don’t grow prideful but instead remain humble with a proper fear of the Lord.

The Right Perspective to Withstand Trials

- ❖ So if we’re to withstand trials in life, we need the right attitude and the right wisdom. Now let’s talk about the right perspective. Let me read vv9-11, *“⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹For 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.”*
 - **What James does here is to speak a word to both poor and rich believers. And he’s trying to correct their perspectives.** Both the poor and the rich have their own set of problems, and they need the right perspective if they want to endure their trials.
- ❖ Now I assume we’d all agree that being poor is a trial, but many would then conclude that being rich is the solution. **But being rich is a trial in itself.** We saw that a few weeks back in **Proverbs 30:8-9** where it says, *“give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, ⁹lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”*
 - **In other words, being poor and being rich are both trials in their own way.** Poverty tempts us towards despair; while wealth tempts us towards pride. But both tempt us towards greed and self-reliance. We take matters into our own hands and solve our problems without God. So being rich and accruing wealth is no solution.
- ❖ The solution is to change your perspective. *“⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰and the rich in his humiliation.”* **So the poor Christian should stop focusing on his lowliness and to start boasting in his exaltation – that means to boast in your exalted status in Christ.** Remember that you’re a child of God. You have been raised with Christ who is seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1). You are co-heirs with Christ. Focus on that.
 - **And the rich Christian should stop focusing on his privilege and to start boasting in his humiliation – that means to boast in your humiliated status in Christ.** Remember that you’ve hitched your wagon to a Crucified Messiah. You’ve sided with a despised and rejected Savior. That’s who you identify with if you’re a true Christian.
- ❖ **The whole point is that, as Christians, we shouldn’t evaluate our circumstances and view our trials apart from our identity in Christ.** No matter what kind of trial you’re going through right now – **ask God for the wisdom to see that trial through the perspective of someone who is in perfect union with Christ.**

- ❖ Because that's who you are if you've put your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. **The newest Christian, the weakest Christian, the most broken, holding-on-by-a-thread Christian – is found in perfect union with Christ.** I know you don't feel it and you don't see it. But sometimes you have to walk by faith and not by sight or by feelings.
 - Just as Elisha had faith to see the invisible chariots of fire surrounding him in the midst of his trial (2 Kg 6:17). Just as Daniel's three friends had faith to see the fourth person with them in the fiery furnace – one whose appearance was like a son of God (Dan 3:25). **We need the same eyes of faith to see that – because of our union with Christ – he's always surrounding us in the midst of our trials.** He's always with us in the furnace of affliction.

- ❖ And not only do we need to see these invisible spiritual realities – **we need God to grant us the perspective to see future, eternal realities.** That's what James is saying in v12, "*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*"

- ❖ **When the trials of life get particularly tough, when you feel like throwing in the towel and giving up – what motivates you to stay steadfast should be the promise of eternal life.** That's what the crown of life is most likely referring to.
 - **Now it's important to stress that James is not motivating us withstand trials by dangling the prospect of heavenly riches.** When you picture a crown of life, don't imagine a jewel-encrusted crown that kings and queens would wear. James didn't use the word *diadema* where we get diadem, a royal crown. There will only be one person in heaven wearing a royal crown. And it won't be any of us.

- ❖ James is talking about a *stephanos*, which refers to a garland of leaves. These leafy crowns were handed out to winners at the original Olympic games. You get one for finishing the race. **So James is saying if you remain steadfast under trial, if you fight the good fight and finish the race – you'll get leafy crown.** Sure, it's a great honor. But, in the end, it's not about the crown. It's about the fact that you withstood your trials and finished your race.
 - **And notice how the giving of that crown of life is based on God's promise – and not your performance.** So in the end, take comfort in knowing that no matter how difficult your trial and no matter how capable you feel at finishing the race – if you love God, he promises to personally see to it that you stay steadfast under trial and that you cross that finish line.