

Five Steps to Joyfully Enduring Trials

James 1:2-18

Background: James was written to help Christians be assured that their faith is genuine. One of the primary marks of real faith is its' continued progress in sanctification towards spiritual maturity. In this opening section, James builds the case for how God uses various situations in our life to strengthen and mature our faith. Through this process of testing, God establishes our genuineness, strengths our trust in Him, builds our spiritual endurance and brings us to full maturity.

Introduction: A Call to Joyfully Endure Trials (James 1:2-4)

James 1:2-4 *"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."*

A. Rejoice that You're Moving towards Maturity (2, 3)

Two things we are instructed to do in these introductory verses. This is the first – that we'd 'count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds'. That we would consciously, deliberately and definitely adopt a mindset of joy, not only in the face of those who would oppose us as we seek to share the gospel, but also that we would be committed to an attitude of joy through the wide variety of difficulties that arise in the circumstances surrounding us in day to day life.

Much more than a cliché call to 'be happy' or a disingenuous 'find the silver lining', this is a command to rejoice that God is actively working in your life to make you the person He created, redeemed and is restoring you to be! Theodore Epp stated, *"To have joy does not necessarily mean we will be hilarious and laughing about the trials we are experiencing, but it means we will have a deep-seated confidence that God knows what He is doing and that the results will be for His glory and our good."* Similarly, D. Edmond Hiebert says, *"James is calling for a positive Christian attitude toward trials that he views as opportunities, under God's grace, for growth and development in the Christian life. Christian faith must apprehend that beneficial results are to be derived from such experiences and so accept them as occasions for rejoicing."* The reason we deliberately fight for joy in these situations is because we understand that they are the means by which God is producing steadfastness in us while moving us toward maturity!

James pictures all of these circumstances in your life as a consistent, heavy burden that is pressing down on you. This process accomplishes two things in your life.

- **First**, it is "working down" on you. The constant flow of difficult circumstances is wearing down your rough edges, it's reshaping your character and refining who you are. (THINK: A rough rock that becomes smooth from the constant exposure to water running over it.)
- **Second**, it is building you up. As you move from one situation to the next, from one trial to the next and faithfully endure them you are building up endurance. Each circumstances is leaving you a little stronger, a little more mature, a little more dependent on God's wisdom and perspective rather than your own. (THINK: Physical muscle mass is built by repeatedly tearing the muscle down. Once the muscle has endured the workout and been given time to recuperate it is left stronger than when you started.)

B. Remain until You've Arrived at Maturity (4)

The second thing we are instructed to do in this opening section is to 'let steadfastness have its full effect'. The command is very simple – when God has you in a situation to move towards maturity, don't try to avoid it or get out of it. It's for your good! Let this process have its full effect.

J. Ronald Blue observes, *'Most people count it all joy when they escape trials. James said to count it all joy in the midst of trials.'* You are commanded to rejoice while remaining in your hard situation...it's the only way you will reach maturity as a follower of Jesus Christ. D. Edmond Hiebert shares, *'Maturity of character is not the result of the number of trials encountered but the way in which those trials are met, allowing them to achieve their divinely intended impact on us.'* The goal isn't for your life to be simple and easy, it's that you would reach the place of being *'perfect and complete, lacking in nothing'*.

James offers three words/phrases to describe this maturity (perfect, complete, lacking in nothing). God's purpose is that you would reach Christian adulthood – not remain in infancy, as a toddler or a teenager (or even an impertinent young adult) but that you would become a fully developed, well-rounded, matured adult who is not deficient in any way. Genuine faith desires this maturity, it joyfully waits for the process to be completed and identifies the trials in life as the blessings they really are.

I. Accept Your Dependency on God (James 1:5)

James 1:5 *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."*

A. You Need Help (5a)

James starts verse 5 by saying, 'if any of you lacks wisdom' but this is a conditional clause that assumes you need wisdom. As you prepare to face a variety of trials and circumstances in your life, it's clear that you will need help to navigate through them maturely with an attitude of joy. Rejoicing in the midst of difficult circumstances does not come naturally, but is a learned process that takes place as God grants you wisdom to see your circumstances for what they are. Each of us needs to be willing to accept that we will need help!

B. You Request Help (5b)

James continues in verse 5 with the straight forward next step – if you need help then you should ask for it!! This is a continual, individual command that each of us is responsible to follow. You must start by accepting that you need help dealing with your current circumstances. You accept that God is the one who can give you the help you need. You personally ask for help. In every circumstance, each time you're dealing with a difficult situation in life, you ask God for the wisdom to trust Him and to endure it with joy.

C. God Grants Help (5c)

Verse 5 concludes with an amazing promise – the result of your acknowledgement of your need for help and the resulting request made to God is that He will grant your request! To enforce this point, James lays out four qualifying statements:

- First, *[God] gives* – it is part of God's inherent nature to give continuously
- Second, *[God gives] generously* – the word means simple or single; the meaning is that God is a focused giver. He is committed to your maturity and is willing to help you get there. He has no ulterior motives, no hidden agenda, He is not looking to bargain with you or exchange his gift for your good works.
- Third, *[God gives] to all* – all Christians have access to the wisdom of God in handling trials in their life; there's no special club or inner circle.

- Fourth, [God gives] without reproach – God does not give and then hold it over your head down the road...there are no strings attached to what He gives and He's not going to put you down for asking.

The first step towards joyfully enduring life's trials is to accept that you are dependent on God for help. You must learn to ask for His help and you should know that God delights in and is committed to helping you.

II. Avoid Your Tendency to Doubt (James 1:6-8)

James 1:6-8 *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.*

The second step towards joyfully enduring trials is to avoid our tendency to doubt. In these three verses James sets up a contrast between the one who asks in faith and the one who doubts in their asking.

Asking in faith highlights the one who is completely committed to the Lord and dependent on Him for all of life – trusting that God intends this trial as part of their maturation process and that God will give them the ability to endure until it's over. This is the type of person verse 5 was talking about and is the type of person who will have their prayers for wisdom answered.

This person of faith is contrasted in verses 6-8 with the one who doubts. Doubting in this verse does not describe the normal process of not knowing all the facts about something (NOTE: It is expected that there will be times when you will not know what the best thing to do is or what the best way to respond is in a particular situation – please consult verse 5 for what to do during those moments!) Doubt in verse 6, pictures one who has a divided mind. An individual who has competing desires and therefore cannot be committed to a singular pursuit.

James has just identified God in the previous verse as One who is single minded in His commitment to your maturity. Now, James condemns the man, who would approach God claiming to want to grow, claiming to desire maturity and wanting to endure through trials and yet continuing to live for their own pursuits and interests. On the one hand they desire to honor God and ask for his help, yet on the other hand they continue in their sin and are unwilling to do what they know is right.

Your request for God's help and for wisdom is merely token because you will choose to do what you will. In your heart of hearts, what you really want is to continue glorifying yourself and to continue gratifying your own desires...you're unwilling to yield and unwilling to lean wholly on the Lord! James identifies this as a radical default in your character. You are like waves in the sea with no shape or form of your own but completely affected and influenced by what is going on around you. You are unstable, with no ability to attain goals or to endure in the midst of life's trials. You are a 'two-souled' person. Williams Barclay comments, '[You are] a walking civil war in which trust and distrust of God wage a continual battle against each other.'

Until you are willing to surrender your pursuit of this world, your pursuit of sin, you should not expect that God is going to grant you His wisdom for navigating through the trials of life. We need to be diligent to avoid our tendency to doubt and double-mindedness.

III. Acknowledge Your Identity is Eternal (James 1:9-12)

James 1:9-12 *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.*

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.

A. Don't be Identified by Temporal Circumstances (9-11)

As God begins to grant us wisdom and as our desire to really grow and mature begins to develop - our perspective begins to shift also. Once upon a time we were wrapped up in the circumstances in life and when these trials would hit they would have the ability to devastate us! Now, the exhortation from James is to not let your temporal circumstances define your existence!

If you're 'lowly' – when you're poor...boast, take pride in, the position you have in Christ! Don't complain about what you don't have, don't covet the things you wish you had, don't play the martyr card about how challenging and difficult your circumstances are. No, see the big picture!! You're a child of the king! You're a worthy member of the church, a Christian who is just as important as everyone else in this room – your temporal circumstances don't define you! You may be in a different social class but you are in the same spiritual class! Let God's wisdom open your eyes this morning to the spiritual height you've been raised to as a child of God!

On the flip side, if you're someone sitting here this morning who has more than what you need to survive, then the exhortation is the same!! Don't find your identity in your stuff and your temporal circumstances!! Your identity and joy in the midst of trials should not be tied to your material possessions but to your position as a child of God. R.C.H. Lenski writes, '*As the poor brother forgets all his earthly poverty, so the rich brother forgets all his earthly riches. By faith in Christ, the two are equals.*' Dan McCartney offers great perspective when he challenges us with,

'Wealthy Christians who are deeply conscious of the transitoriness of wealth, who do not get attached to it, who do not place confidence in it, who do not find their identity in it, and who do not use wealth to put themselves above others may indeed 'glory' or 'boast' in knowing that ultimately their position is a lowly one. Wealthy Christians know that since it is the poor whom God chooses (2:5; cf. 4:6), their wealth places them in a precarious position, and their only true reason for glory is the same as that of the poor: they know, and are known by, a gracious God (Jer. 9:23, 24).'

B. Do be Identified by Eternal Life (12)

The positive side of this is that we should be defined by who God has made us. Don't get bogged down being defined by your circumstances. Rather, look ahead, see who you are as a child of God, realize what that will mean for you and find identity in that life. Understanding where we're headed allows us to bear up under trials. When difficult times hit you are not moved, you aren't shaken because the circumstances of life aren't what your life is about.

You rejoice at remaining steadfast under trial because you know what that trial is doing for your maturity. You want maturity more than you want the things of this world. You have asked God and received the wisdom from him to look ahead and see the crown of life that has been promised to you and is waiting for you!

My relationship with Christ, my eternal standing with him, the person he is growing me to be – that's what I find my identity in. I can take or leave my stuff here, my financial well-being, my retirement fund, my insurance rates, my family, my job security. They may be important but they're not what define me and what my joy is based upon! My identity is eternal as a child of the king!!

IV. Attack Your Propensity to Sin (James 1:13-15)

James 1:13-15 *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and*

enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

While we are not defined by our circumstances, we must still live in this world and will still be affected by those circumstances that crop up in our life. In these difficult moments, our ability to fight for joy and against the temptation to sin will be affected by how we think about God, sin and our selves. To help us with this, our fourth step is to attack our propensity to sin based on our understanding of where temptation comes from and where it leads to.

A. Understand Where Temptation Comes From (13, 14)

First of all, understand where temptation comes from...James is abundantly clear in these verses that temptation does not come from God! Not a single person has grounds for blaming God for their sinfulness or failure from temptation. This is true because God cannot be tempted by evil (for it is against His nature) and because God, Himself, tempts no one (for it is against His character).

We need to be careful of shifting the blame for our sin back onto God. Beware of seeking to rationalize your actions by saying that God could have prevented them in the first place. Don't give in to sin and blame God for it.

This is the excuse Adam made in the garden. Genesis 3:12 – *'The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."'* Admittedly, Adam blames Eve (she gave him the fruit), but then notice what he says! Who gave him the woman?! God did – yes, I sinned God, but it's your fault!! If you had just kept me out of that situation then everything would be okay! Sure, Eve was meant as a blessing, and most of the time she's pretty great, but look at what this situation made me do! Just like Adam, we can get caught in the trap of blaming God for our sin. Proverbs 19:3 discloses, *'When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord.'*

All such claims are futile efforts to escape the real problem, that we bear personal responsibility for our own actions. D. Edmond Hiebert explains, *'James is not denying that God does indeed subject me to testing, but he does deny the claim that God tests men with an evil intent to lead them into sin. Testings are necessary to develop the desired moral maturity and strength in His people, but He does not solicit men to evil.'* God's purpose for trials in your life is to validate and mature your faith – not to lead you into sin!

Temptation, according to James, comes from you! The active agent of temptation in your life is not the circumstances God is allowing you to go through but is the passions that dwell in your heart and mind! Sin is not the result of external circumstances, but internal desires. Each one of us has a propensity for sin that must be dealt with!

James says that these internal passions or desires both 'lure' and 'entice' us. 'Lure' pictures the intensity of the desire that almost forcefully draws you toward the object of your desire. 'Entice' conveys the picture of fishing and particularly catching with bait. It views the juicy worm being dangled in front of the fish, his inner craving for the worm prompts him to bite, but he has been deceived and is now caught!

This is the way your sinful passions work. It begins by a longing for sin, the force of that desire continues to tug at you, drawing you toward it. The juiciness of the potential sin is being waved in front of your face, daring you to try it. If this initial desire, this thought of temptation is not stopped, it will lead to full-blown sin in your life.

B. Understand Where Temptation Leads To (15)

Once we understand where sin comes from (our own desires), we need to realize where it's headed. At the moment you choose to not fight the temptation, to not take a stand against sin in your

life, when you finally yield to this enticing temptation, James says that your desire has conceived and has given birth to sin.

The scary part is, it's never just one sin! Never just one lie, one time or one area of life...it begins to consume you! If you will not actively engage it, to fight it and to kill it, it will continue to grow and progress. Just this one act of indulging your sin begins a process of hardening your heart toward the Lord. It begins to callous your heart towards sin and it begins to get easier and easier to sin and your sinful desires mature and grow! James is clear, that if this sin is not identified and killed off through a process of repentance that it will become 'fully grown'. Joseph Mayor defined fully grown sin this way, '[Sin] becomes full grown when it has become a fixed habit determining the character of man.'

The result of unbridled sin in our lives is that it separates us from God. We simply cannot endure in His presence and are unable to live a life that is honoring to Him. Failure to attack our propensity to sin will make us unable to function as mature Christians and will prohibit us from enduring trials with joy.

V. Appreciate Your Quality of Care (James 1:16-18)

James 1:16-18 *Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

A. Trust the Character of God (16, 17)

The fight for joy in enduring trials is affected when we are deceived into thinking incorrectly about the character of God! James draws upon two aspects of God's character that should encourage us in the midst of hardship.

The first, is the goodness of God. While some in the last section accused God of giving them opportunities to sin, James presents us with quite the opposite here – God gives good and perfect gifts! 'Good' describes that which is useful and beneficial in its effect, while 'perfect' marks the circumstances as being complete and not lacking in any way. For example, receiving tickets to the SuperBowl this year would be a very good gift...both useful and beneficial. However, receiving tickets to the SuperBowl that include an all-inclusive paid trip (airfare, lodging, food, rental car and a tax write-off) with a guarantee that the Seattle Seahawks will win the game is not just a good gift but a perfect one...not lacking in any way!

This is the kind of God we have. He isn't leading you toward sin. He hasn't placed trials in your life so that you will struggle and fail. You're not going through something challenging right now because God got a little lazy and just didn't get around to ironing your situation out. Your situation in life right now...every...single...circumstance...is a good and perfect gift from God!

Then, James goes a step further. He explains that these circumstances are 'from above' which means that they don't just randomly happen to you but that each one of them is planned out by God. Furthermore, they are 'coming down' into your life in an unending succession. God has set up His heavenly conveyor belt and is shipping you one perfectly prepared situation after the other to enter your life at the perfect time to cause you to become a little bit more of the person He has designed you to be. Each one smoothing out your character a little more. Each one causing you to trust Him just a little bit more. Each one giving you a little bit more strength to endure through the difficult time in a joyful way that will bring glory to Him!

I would say that our God is utterly good!!!

The second characteristic James identifies is the fact that God is incapable of change. Lest you have a hard time believing that the goodness of God is really true in your life (clearly God was sleeping on the job or has abandoned his goodness when it comes to your life situation).

James explains that God is constant. There are no variations or shadows with Him. Lights may flicker, the stars in time will go out, the brightness of the sun and moon are constantly changing, but God does not. He is always the same. He is without change. He is constant. There are no flaws in his nature or character that would allow for variation, no unknown variables that will change the equation. You can have complete confidence in His character and in His plan!

B. Trust the Plan of God (18)

God's plan for you is not new and these trials in your life are not without meaning. God's plan involved your salvation. James said that God accomplished this *'of his own will'*, that *'he brought us forth'*, and that it occurred *'by the word of truth'*.

'Of his own will' indicates that your salvation was by God's choice and according to His purpose. James 1:15 informed us that sin brought death, but 1:18 informs us that God chose, God willed, that you would not perish in sin! D. Edmond Hiebert expands, *'[God's] deliberate will to save us was not forced by any outside necessity. Having willed it, God acted freely to save us—a fact wholly inconsistent with the claim that God tempts an individual to sin.'*

Therefore, *'he brought us forth'* or more literally, *'he gave birth to us'*. For all Christians, there must be a specific time when you died to your sinful desires and were born again to new life through the gracious work of God in your heart.

How does this happen? James answers, *'by the word of truth'*. The means by which God brings individuals to be born again is through the written words of Scripture – it is the source of our transformation. There is no substitute in your life for the word of God; it is your spiritual nourishment.

Amazingly, God's plan to save you and cause you to grow to maturity does not end with you! God's plan continues with the restoration of all of His creation. Your restoration is a signpost that points forward to what God is going to do for all of creation some day! As a Christian, you are an example of the freedom and redemption that God will accomplish for everything that's been created once He returns. You are a living reflection of God's character and plan to the world. The command then is not to be deceived about the character and nature of God, but rather to understand that you greatly cared for, that you are intimately loved, that you are in the process of maturing and have a responsibility to endure that with joy because in so doing you bear testimony to the fact that the circumstances of this life don't matter because Christ is returning to redeem His entire Creation!!

Concluding questions to ponder:

- James contrasts the man of faith with the man of doubt – which one are you? Where can you identify a double-mindedness in your life? What is stopping you from accepting your dependence on God and pursuing Him with your whole heart?
- How can you live with an eternal mindset this week? In what ways are you identifying yourself by temporal things? What earthly idols in your heart need to be forsaken?
- In what ways are you actively engaged in the battle against sin in your life? Are you currently engaged in habitual sin? What steps do you need to take to cut that sin off before it begins?
- Do you really believe that God is good and working for your good? What events or things in your life cause you to doubt this? How can you reflect God's plan of redemption in as you go about your daily routine?