

Faith that Works: Seeing Trials from a God-Oriented Perspective

James 1:1-8

I want to ask you to do a little exercise as we start today. Make a list on your outline or at least in your mind of trials that you are facing right now. What are the difficult things that you are facing? Jot them down. I did this earlier this week and there were several things I put on my list. Some of them are smaller things, but there were a couple on my list that were pretty heavy things.

What's on your list? Financial pressures. Health issues. Conflict in a relationship. A challenging academic semester. Issues related to your work. Or maybe it is actually being belittled for your faith in Jesus in some way.

Now, as you look at your list, how do you tend to think or feel about the things you see there? I know for me, I want to see them gone. I want to see them solved. Fixed. Over. I like when life is comfortable and easy sailing. How about you? How do you think about that trials that you are facing?

Today, we start a sermon series on the book of James that we've entitled, *Faith that Works*. And right at the start of this book, James is going to speak to this issue of how we think about trials. He is going to challenge us to have a God-oriented perspective regarding our trials.

James is a very practical book that helps us understand how our faith in Jesus should work out in a number of areas of life – in our speech, in prayer, in issues of poverty and wealth, in trials and temptations, as well as in a number of other areas. James isn't a book about how we work our way to God; it is a book that expresses how we are to live now that we do know God. Genuine faith in Jesus changes us. It changes how we live. It is a faith that works.

Today, we are going to see how faith in Jesus should work out in how we navigate trials that come our way. We are going to focus our attention on 1:2-8, but let me read and comment on verse one briefly.

¹ James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

There are a number of options for whom this James could be, but the prominent view is that this is James, the brother of Jesus, who eventually became the leader of the Jerusalem church. After Jesus' resurrection, James became a believer and a follower of Jesus. And as he introduces himself here, he rather humbly calls himself a *bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. Most believe that James is the earliest of the New Testament writings probably written sometime in the mid to late 40s.

James writes to *the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*. Of course after Israel was carried away into exile no longer did the twelve tribes of Israel exist. But James uses this expression to

refer to Jewish Christians who lived outside of Palestine, and maybe also in a metaphorical sense to refer to the church as the new Israel living as the scattered people of God (Osborne, 19). This is who we are. We live as exiles in this world. We are not in our true home. And so like the Jewish Christians of James' day, we need the wisdom that James offers us in this book to know how to live. We need to understand a faith that works!

As the scattered people of God, James' readers faced trials. This is one of his chief concerns and it is where he starts his letter. He encourages them and us to:

I. See Trials from a God-oriented perspective (vv. 2-4)

James says:

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,

My brethren (i.e. "my brothers and sister") is a term of affection. And it is out of this heart of love and care that he gives them this command: *consider it all joy* when you experience trials of all kinds.

He's commanding us to make a conscious decision to regard the trials that we are facing as joy. Now, my first reaction is typically not joy. Usually it is frustration or disappointment or fear or any other number of emotions. We don't like trials. We would rather life be comfortable and smooth sailing. It is natural to feel this way. And so we have to make a choice to do what James is saying here to make a mental switch to see our trials from a God-oriented perspective. And that is to consider them as joy.

He is not saying that you need to feel happy about your trials. He is saying consider it all joy, and joy is a very different thing than happiness. Joy is a deep satisfaction in the ways of God. It is something the Spirit produces in us. You can be joyful without necessarily being happy.

Now why would he urge this? He does so because trials can bear good fruit in our lives. He says to consider them all joy. . .

³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

Endurance is a needed virtue in our Christian walks. Endurance is the ability to persevere, to stand firm, to hang in there in difficult times. If we are going to run the race of the Christian life well to the end, we must have endurance. And James is telling us that it is through trials that endurance is produced in us.

When James says, *the testing of your faith*, his point isn't that trials prove whether you have faith or not. Trials certainly do this, but that's not his point here. His point is that trials are something God uses to strengthen our faith. Just as fire tests metal and burns off the impurities so that the metal is strengthened, so too trials in the life of a believer.

James then says this about endurance:

⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The NIV says to “Let perseverance finish its work” (NIV). And the finished work of endurance is character development. We are to let endurance do this in our lives so that we will be *perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*. The idea here is that we would come to maturity and a place of moral wholeness. If we allow endurance to do this in us, then we will be *lacking in nothing*. We lack nothing pertaining to Christ-like virtues.

Now, the fact that he says *let endurance have* this result in our lives means that we have a choice. We can hinder this. We can choose not to see trials from God’s vantage point and therefore not yield to God in the midst of them. And if we do this then we will miss the good work that He wants to accomplish in our lives through trials.

And so, if we think about the big picture here, James is saying that when you encounter trials choose to have a God-oriented mindset. Understand that God allows trials into your life because He wants to develop your character. And if you can do that, then you are in a place to consider even the most difficult of trials as something in which you can take joy.

As I was meditating on this passage this week, I began to think about one of the trials that I’ve faced over the past number of years. I can’t share the details other than to say that it is a situation that has caused deep concern in my heart and I’ve been burdened by this concern for a number of years. And though I’ve been trying to trust God with this situation, and I pray about it often, I don’t know that I’ve ever thought about counting it as joy. My focus has simply been on asking God to change this situation as quickly as possible. But as I’ve considered this passage, I realize that I need to see this trial from a God-oriented perspective. I need to choose to count it as joy knowing that God is using this very thing to produce endurance in my life. He is using it to develop my character.

How do you think about your trials? Are you just bearing them with a kind of passive resignation? Is your focus on escaping from them as soon as you can? Are you maybe even mad at God because you know that as an all-knowing and all-powerful God, He could get you out of this thing if He wanted to and yet He hasn’t? Or, are you making the mental choice to have a God-oriented perspective and to count it as joy because you know that you are facing an opportunity to grow in your character?

I know what some of you are facing. Painful, scary, weighty trials. Trials that keep you up at night. And so I’m not saying this choice is easy. It’s not. But here’s the deal, whether or not you count it as joy, the trial is still going to be there. If you don’t choose to trust God and consider them as joy, you can in fact become embittered at God. You can begin to doubt His goodness. And if you go down that road, trials won’t lead to growth, they can lead to spiritual ruin. But if you will hang onto the fact that God loves you and He is working good in your life at all times,

you can make the choice to consider them as joy even the most difficult trials. And God can use them to cause growth in your life.

Now, I'm guessing for most of us we would say that sometimes this is hard to have this God-oriented perspective on our trials. If so, what do we do? James says:

II. **Ask for wisdom when struggling to have a God-oriented perspective on trials (vv. 5-8)**

For some reason, until now, I don't know that I've ever seen the connection between asking for wisdom and counting it all joy. I've looked at these verses on asking for wisdom as a stand-alone command to ask for wisdom when I need it. I do think we can apply it to any need for wisdom, but in the context it does connect to what we've just looked at. James says:

⁵ But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

The NIV and ESV do not translate the connective (i.e. "but), but it is there in the original text. There is a connection.

Having a God-oriented perspective on our trials takes wisdom. If you ARE able to count it all as joy when you face trials, you are walking in wisdom. But sometimes we can really struggle to do this and so ask God for wisdom. He promises to give it to us!

Proverbs tells us that wisdom is rooted in the fear of God (Prov. 1:7). It is a gift from God that helps us walk rightly in this world. If we have wisdom, we obey God, and we have discernment between good and evil. We have skills and understanding in living a godly life.

James is assuming that we do lack wisdom at times. The way James writes this it has the connotation of, "since you lack wisdom" ask for it. *Ask* is a present tense imperative and so the encouragement is an ongoing prayer for wisdom. We keep looking to God, we keep coming to Him, we keep asking for wisdom.

We can ask with confidence, because we are asking a God who is a giving God who gives *generously*. It is God's heart to give and to do so freely and graciously to meet our needs. And He gives *without reproach*. He doesn't belittle you for your weakness. He doesn't give based on your merits. God doesn't roll his eyes at you when you come asking for wisdom again. No, he gives *generously and without reproach* to all.

Ask for wisdom. And if you do, he makes the promise that *it will be given to him*. But there is a condition. We must ask in faith. Verse 6:

⁶ But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

The word that James uses for doubt has the sense of a divided or wavering mind. James is talking about the person who wavers between trusting God and not trusting God. This is a person who has not settled the issue of whom he or she will trust. This is a person who has an internal conflict of divided loyalties. They are like the *surf of the sea*. They are up. "I believe. I trust God." They are down. "I doubt. I don't trust God." Up and down. Trust and doubt.

James says:

⁷ For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

The person who has not settled the fundamental issue of whether they trust God or not is *double-minded*. He is of two minds. He trusts God, but he doesn't. And so he is *unstable in all his ways*. This person cannot expect that *he will receive anything from the Lord*.

The promise is for those who have faith without any doubting. It is for those who take God at His word. It is this person who can ask for wisdom and know that God will give it.

Now, is this saying that we can never express any kind of doubt to God? Is that even possible if we are being honest? Some of the psalmists express real doubts and questions about what God was up to at times, right? For instance, in Psalm 13:1 the psalmist writes,

*How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?*

These are real questions about what God is up to. He doesn't get it. And he expresses this to God. But here's the thing, by the end of the psalm, he says:

But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness. . .

There is an honest expression of doubt and concern about what God is doing, but in the end the psalmist has this settled trust in God. When the psalmists experience doubt, they let that doubt drive them to reflect on God's goodness and faithfulness and in the end they trust. They are not double-minded. The issue is settled.

James is talking about the one who fundamentally has not decided that God is trustworthy.

Certainly, one application here is to ask for wisdom as we face trials. Ask and keep on asking in faith. You have a promise here that God will indeed give you wisdom for each and every trial that you are facing.

But if you are going to be able to ask in faith, you need to make a fundamental decision about God. Will you trust Him? Will you choose to believe that God is good, and that He has only good plans for your life? This issue **MUST** be settled if you are going to ask in faith.

At one time or another we all struggle with this question. And sometimes we've settled the issue but then we face a more difficult trial and we find that we need to revisit this question. Will I trust God? Do I believe He is good? Do I believe that He is working out what is genuinely good in my life through the trials that He is allowing into my life?

Sadly, some will conclude that there is no way that God can be good AND allow the trial that they are experiencing. And they walk away from God. Some of you might be right there this morning. In light of the trials in your life right now, you are on the last straw with God. This passage is urging you to consider that thing in your life, as hard and painful as it might be, joy knowing that God wants to use it to form your character. But you can only do that IF you trust God. You can only do that if you have a God-oriented perspective.

And so how do you trust God when you are facing trials? How do you possibly join together the idea that a loving God is allowing you to suffer some really hard things? When we are asking these kinds of questions, the best place to go is to the cross. What Jesus did for us on the cross is central to settling in our hearts that God is good and He is for us. God sent His son into the world to suffer and die for our sin. And He rose from the dead to give us new life. That God would allow His son to suffer and die, to experience the horror of that trial for us, confirms beyond question that God is for us and He is working good for us even in the most difficult trials.

And so today, as we celebrate the Lord's Table let the bread and the cup remind you that God loved you so much that He sent His precious son to die for you. In these moments settle this issue of being all in with God. Invite God to help you decide that in light of the cross the only thing that makes sense is to trust God fully with everything He is doing in your life.