

Trials: A Practical Perspective

James 1:1-4

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TRANSCRIPT:

James 1:1-4 tells us, "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."

Father, we come to You once again asking that You would send Your Holy Spirit to take the words of God and to press them upon our hearts so that we might be conformed to the image of Your dear Son and that we might rejoice all the more in our God and in our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Imagine, if you will, a teenage boy living in first-century Jerusalem, witnessing the great advancement of the Christian gospel. What began in an upper room with just 120 people has now become thousands of believers in Jesus Christ that gather together at Jerusalem to hear the Word of God. And you attend there and you hear the Word of God proclaimed by the mouth of the apostles, and this impact and this growth seem to you as an unstoppable force.

One day, your father returns home hurriedly before the end of his selling of his goods at the market with a very distressed look on his face, and he gathers the family around and says, "We need to pack our bags now and leave this city tonight. It's not safe for us to be here anymore." And your mother inquires, "Why? What happened?" Your father responds by saying, "Stephen, the deacon of our church, has been executed by stoning by the religious rulers of this land, and now he has become a martyr." And you say, "But Dad, how could such a thing like this happen? How could God allow such a thing like this to happen? What is the meaning of all this?"

Your father responds and says to you, "My son, remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. And if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.'" The Bible

teaches us in Acts 8 that Saul was ravaging the church at Jerusalem, entering house after house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison. And the day in which Stephen was stoned to death and Saul was consenting to his death, the Bible teaches us that there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

What I've described as what may have been the scene in one of the houses there at that time was probably a very common experience amongst many of the early church that was here described as they were all scattered to the regions. This for them, as the scripture mentions and as was mentioned in history, these were the days of the beginning of the diaspora or the dispersion, where God was, through this persecution, spreading His church throughout the world so that they might proclaim the gospel in the regions beyond, in which they very much did, which led to many house churches and churches being started right throughout Asia Minor as well.

And it is to this people that James writes his epistle: "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings." These Jewish early believers who trusted in Jesus Christ, who were the people of God, they now were dispersed. And James writes a letter to them, reminding them of God's purpose in trials. He gives them practical advice, gives them a practical perspective on trials. What is the good of trials? To what end are they serving?

As you can imagine this child or this young boy asking this question, it's the question that we ask also, right? And James seeks to answer at least one aspect of this question, to which there are a variety of answers, but one to which I'd like to look at today in verses two through four. It says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." James reminds them that trials are inevitable. "When you meet trials of various kinds" is the particular wording that he chooses to use, not "if you meet trials of various kinds." It is "when you meet trials of various kinds." Trials are inevitable.

We live in a broken world, a fallen world where sin has entered into this world and caused havoc. The hearts of men are not pure. Politicians do not lead according to the truth of God. We must be careful of an overrealized eschatology that thinks heaven is going to be complete now in this life. No, we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will make all things new.

So he says, "Count it all joy when you meet various hardships and kinds of trials; they will inevitably cross your path. You will run into them. You will experience them." And the kinds of hardship in this passage are various. He uses that word quite deliberately because he's not trying to just make

this text apply to those that are being physically persecuted and chased out of cities. But the trials actually even mentioned in this epistle include financial pressures. James 1:9 talks about the poor person who is the brother of low degree, or "let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation," that is, in the Lord. But he talks about financial pressures.

He talks about temptations to sin in verses 13 through 16 of this passage. He talks about ostracization, of dishonoring the poor in church assemblies that was happening in those fellowships. In James 2:6, he says, "But you have dishonored the poor man." Here you go, a seat for the rich and a seat for the poor in the house of God. If Jesus walked into a church like that, He would turn the tables over again, wouldn't He? But this was happening.

The mistreatment of laborers in businesses, of which obviously people in this church were a part of that he was reminding him of, in James 5:4: "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." And so he's rebuking the business owners that are mistreating their laborers. But obviously, there would have been people in the church that were being mistreated, slaves and servants, of course, included there.

In James 5:13, general suffering is the word that he uses here to show that this was the experience of the people in the church. And last but not least, sickness in verse 14: "Is any sick among you?" A trial, a hardship, a pressure. But trials are not limited to that which is referred to in this passage. The variety of them extends far more, and they include any kind of spiritual, emotional, or physical affliction or hardship or painful circumstance that comes into your life that ultimately tests your faith.

It could be that you experience loss, that is, loss of a loved one. It could be, as I said, financial pressures and burdens. It could be that you lose your reputation. It could mean loneliness for some, that you don't have a friend that you can talk to, and you just feel that you're alone in life. It could refer to the guilt of past sin that has now been forgiven by the blood of Christ that continues to plague you day after day and cause a pressure and depression in your life. Various trials.

Some in our church here today, you perhaps have battled with things like cancer. For some of you, separation in marriage, a hardship that has broken your heart. For some of you, you have struggles with your children, and it feels that they are not for you but rather against you, and the pressures mount in your life. Some of you, like even Natalie and I, have experienced long battles with infertility, of which you ask, "Why, Lord?" And we don't understand all the reasons for why He orders things the way He orders

them. But the point is that although the trials are various, they ultimately are one.

Because what he says in this text is, "For you know that the testing of your faith works patience." So the various kinds of hardships could also be referred to as the testing of your faith. You see, the truth is, it actually doesn't really matter what the particular hardship is in your life. That's actually not the real issue at play. The real issue at play is the test of your faith. The real thing that the hardship does that God wants us to be mindful of, the real issue is not necessarily how we respond physically to it, but how we are responding spiritually to it. It's how our faith is holding up under it.

The pressure comes, the hardship comes, sometimes it just seems so tailor-made for you. But you don't understand it all, and you're not meant to understand it all, but what you are meant to understand is this: that this is a test of your faith. You ought to think of it as such. And the word "testing of your faith" carries a word picture there, and the idea that it's like metal, silver, or gold that is placed in the fire. And as the silver and gold are placed in the fire, the fire and the heat and the pressure and the atmosphere of that burning furnace test the quality of the metals. The testing of your faith.

The fires of adversity that come into our lives both purify, just like it does with the gold, it takes away the dross and the impure metals that may be in it, but it does more than that. It also strengthens the quality of it. And it also tests the genuineness of it. Because if something looks like gold and you put it in the fire, you'll see what it really is about. And so testings and trials that come into our lives are there, by God, given to us or allowed in our lives to test the genuineness of our faith. Is the gold pure, or is it fake? Is the faith that you profess to have truly your possession?

Do we really believe that God is good? Do we really believe that God is kind? Do we believe that God is sovereign, that He's in control over all? Do we really believe the promises of the Word of God? Do we really believe all that God says about Himself and about His gospel and about the purpose that we have here in this life? A test of the genuineness of our faith.

And in Matthew 13, when Jesus talks about the sower who sows, and he sows seed of the gospel along the wayside, and he sows it where there's rocky ground, and he sows it where there's thorns, and he sows it also where there is good ground, Jesus reminds us that that which was sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet has no root in himself, but endures for a little while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. Faith has been tested. The gospel goes out; many people receive

it, but there are many that turn back from Jesus because His sayings are too hard.

When He talks about a cross and taking up a cross and following Me, they didn't bargain for that. The trying of your faith tests the genuineness of it, but as I said, also for those of us that have true and genuine faith in Jesus Christ, the fire shall not hurt you. He has only designed the dross to consume and the gold to refine. It strengthens and it improves the quality of our faith.

You've all seen it before. You, of you that have been married for any length of time, two newlyweds head down to the altar, and it's a beautiful day and a wonderful occasion, all to be rejoicing and praising the Lord for because of the union of marriage. This man and this woman, you'd say like spring chickens, wet behind the ears, stand before each other and make some very big promises: in sickness and in health, for richer and poorer, and for better or for worse, till death do us part. And it sounds strong, and it's good. I'm not saying we shouldn't make vows. We pledge to be honest with one another. We make our commitments, just as we do to Christ, just as we do to the gospel, just as we do. We profess this truth.

But those words are tested, and when trials and afflictions come into the marriage, when hardships and the bride or the husband that you married didn't appear to be all that you thought they would be, it's like your metal has gone into the fire of this furnace. And all that you professed on that altar is now being put to the test. Now, for those of God's people that pursue with everything that they have, their best to do all that God has called them to do and all that they have vowed to do, what they find through the furnace of affliction that comes in a marriage, for example, or comes in the difficult times that they experience as a couple, what they find is that the superficial dross wastes away, and the marriage becomes stronger, deeper, richer, and it gets to the point in which that relationship feels to be unshakable. There's a deep settled conviction. It's not only more the excitement of the fact that I just found a partner necessarily; it's more than that. Now I have found a lifelong companion, and I am seeing how that relationship is taking deep root. But you only see that under time and pressure.

But why all this suffering? Why all this hardship? Are trials a waste? What is their good? What is their intention? What is the purpose and goal for this affliction that perhaps you're experiencing now in this life at this time of your life? Well, it says in verse number three, "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."

According to God's Word, God is telling us that the fiery trials that come

into our lives and that test our faith are there to produce in us what is regarded in verse number four as the perfect man. The complete man. The man who lacks in nothing. This is the question of the philosophers, as it were, for the ages. How can we be the ideal man? The mature, the perfect, the complete man, the man content. For Aristotle, this is the great-souled man. Man of the soul who is noble and wise and has a strong intellect and is strong. For Friedrich Nietzsche, it's the Übermensch man. I asked Iggy how to pronounce this German word. But he's the superman, so to say, who has overcome the traditional moral values and created his own meaning and value for life. The perfect man in his philosophy. For Plato, it's the philosopher-king, who's this wise, perfect ruler who is superior in intellect and reason and is driven only by love.

But according to the Word of God, the perfect man is none other than the man Christ Jesus. The perfect man, the complete man, the man who lacks in nothing, is best demonstrated in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Who demonstrated and embodied a biblical response to suffering like none other, as it is revealed in this text. One who could count it all joy when he was met with trials of various kinds. Did He weep? Yes. Did He cry? Yes. Did He cry out because He was pained? Yes. Did He always just have a smile on the outward appearance of His face? No. "Lord, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me," He agonized, His soul in the garden.

But in Christ, we see the perfect harmony and unity of this idea of counting it all joy when you are met with various trials. Because despite all the pain and the suffering and the weeping, there was a constant, consistent joy in His heart and a contentment in His God that could not be shaken. "Let this cup pass from Me, but nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done." The one who endured the cross and despised the shame, the one that we are to mimic and copy and follow after, was the one who endured the cross and despised the shame for the joy that was set before Him; He did those very things.

The one who was said of Him in the Psalms, "That is written in the book, I delight to do Your will, O my God." This Jesus, the man Christ Jesus, the Lord Christ Jesus, the King Christ Jesus, is the one who embodied this passage like none other. The one who was sorrowful yet always rejoicing. The man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, but the man who never failed in rejoicing in His God. You think, how can these things work? Yes, it's a very supernatural thing, isn't it? The natural man cannot perceive this. But it is a divine, spiritual illumination that comes upon the hearts and lives of those who know the Lord Jesus Christ, that they, like the Lord Jesus, can see through the thick fog of a trial into the light of the glorious purposes of God. Into the light of the goodness of God. They can rest in something beyond the hill, beyond the valley, and they can see the goodness of God

nonetheless.

How can I be like Jesus? How can I fulfill this passage of scripture and count it all joy when I fall into various kinds of trials? Well, the first thing you can do is believe in Jesus. There's no other greater strength in trials than to know the Jesus who gave His life for your sins, this Jesus who takes up residence by His Spirit in the heart of all those who believe in Him. Jesus says to His disciples, "My peace I leave with you. Not like the world gives, but a peace that can never be robbed from you. My joy, no man will take away from you." Why? Because Jesus, the joy of living and the joy of life and the joy of humanity, will live in the hearts of those who truly trust Him and believe in Him.

But also, He says in this text, how can we be like Jesus? Well, we need to know something. He says, "For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." How can we be like Jesus? Well, it's to count it all joy when you go into various kinds of trials, but how are we even to count it all joy when we go into various kinds of trials? Well, He says you should have a deep conviction of something. There's something that you should know. There's something that you do know, but you should continually reckon it to be true in your heart and mind as you face trials.

And that is this: that the testing of your faith produces maturity, produces contentment, produces a kind of completeness. It produces what may be just regarded as a Christlikeness. You want to be like Jesus? Well, you can't be like Jesus without the fiery furnace of affliction. The testing of your faith produces Christlikeness in your life, so that your life might be conformed more to the image of His life. So that when you come out through the fire time and time again, you shine a little brighter with the presence and glory of Jesus in your life and in your heart. And this does not come without trials. This does not come without afflictions.

The Bible teaches us that our parents, they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them. We as kids thought there was a better way, but hey. But He, God, disciplines us for our good. Sometimes they did it because they were angry. Sometimes they did it because we just ticked them off. But He does it for our good, that we may share in His holiness. You get that? The rod of God's chastisement is so that you and I might share in His holiness. That we might be like the perfect man, that we might be like the complete man, the man that is content, the man that looks like Jesus.

We might share in His holiness, for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. And we all say amen to that. But later, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. You see, it's like a trainer in the gym. And when you get to the gym for the first

time, and you're going through this 30-minute workout, and at five minutes, you just want to walk out of that gym, and you probably do, actually. Or you sit down in the corner and like... But that five minutes, if you stay to the side and don't endure it, will always stay five minutes. But if you endure it and you're steadfast under the trial and under the pressure of the instructor, that five minutes becomes six minutes, and that six minutes becomes ten minutes, and that ten minutes becomes twenty minutes, and next thing you know, you're thirty minutes unhuffed and puffed, and you can go out the whole exercise regime. Why? Because steadfastness under pressure produces an endurance that makes you like the perfect man.

And so instead of us complaining and kicking and cursing God, we should, as the scripture says here, count it all joy when we fall into difficult trials and temptations. But more than this, we should do what the scripture says here and says let steadfastness have its full effect. Don't cut steadfastness short. You hang in there with endurance and by the grace of God, hold on to the promises of God despite the storms of life, despite the persecution, despite the sickness, and where there seems like no light at the tunnel, and your faith will be strengthened and increased, and you'll be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Instead of complaining, kicking, and cursing against God, we should let steadfastness have its full effect in our lives so we might be more like Jesus. The old Arab proverb says, "Sunshine all the time makes deserts." Sunshine all the time makes deserts. There is a purpose for darkness; there is a purpose for rain; there is a purpose for storm, and it is not meaningless. There is a practical perspective that ought to be ours, that we ought to believe, that we ought to know and hold fast to in the midst of our trial.

Dear sisters, next time you marry one, look at that diamond ring on your finger. Never forget, always remember, that diamonds are formed under the earth's extreme heat and pressure. The finest of gems are under the most intense pressure. No pressure, no diamonds; that's the way it works. No steadfastness on the trial, no perfect and complete man. No steadfastness on the trial, you will always be covetous, wanting more, and you won't be like that person who is complete, lacking in nothing, being satisfied with God and with Christ alone.

We long to be like Jesus. We pray, "Lord, make me like Yourself. Lord, I want to be holy. Lord, I want to be purged from sin. Lord, I want to love my neighbor as myself. Lord, I want to be able to do this and do that for Your kingdom." But we are like that man who was so desperate for patience that he cried out to God, "Lord, give me patience, and give it to me now." That's what we're like. We cry out to God; we want God to form Himself

in us. We hate the dross in our lives. We look at our lives as filthy and corrupt, and we want to be more like Jesus. We want to be happy and content in God. And we seek God for such things, and God says, "Okay, the way and the pathway there is through trial and affliction. Hang on, buckle up, brace yourself. You want to be a diamond? Come with me down to the bottom of the earth, and let the heat and extreme pressure wipe away all that dross, and you'll come forth shining as gold."

Want to be used for the kingdom of God? You want to be one who can be, as it were, the complete and perfect man who lacks in nothing? Well, it's never going to come to you without hardship. And so now you can see the logic in the command: count it all joy when you fall or when you are met with various trials. Without the practical perspective, this is absolutely absurd. Tell an atheistic man who doesn't believe in God and the purposes of God and the goodness of God and the holiness of God and the kindness of God, "Be joyful in your trials," and he'll say, "You're insane and you're mad." And I would say, "Yes, according to your worldview, we are insane and we are mad, but your worldview is wrong." It doesn't work that way. This is how God has designed it for us, so we can look like Jesus. This is how God has set out the path to be the perfect and complete man, and we'll be there one day when we get to heaven and to glory.

But in light of the word of God and in light of the truth of God and in light of the goodness of God and the holiness of God, these commands to rejoice in trials take on a whole new shape. We can look at life's trials as an occasion for joy. That's not that we ignore the sorrow, but we can cry, trusting in God. We can weep over death, but we can also thank God for the life that that person and the effects of that person had in our lives and the time we got to share with them. You see, we can cry over sickness and be troubled by it and, in one sense, down about it, but we can stop and thank God for all the health that He has given us up until this point. You see, you see what's happening here? We can constantly find occasions for joy in the midst of trials, so we can live in this tension of joy and sorrow like our Lord Jesus Christ because we know this to be true: that God uses this in our lives to make us more like Jesus.

We can look at the hardest afflictions that we go through and say, "God, You love me enough to let me go through this so that I can be more like You." Instead of cursing You and hating You and not trusting You, I'm going to lean wholly upon You and say, "God, I want steadfastness to have its full effect in my life, that I might be complete and more like You." This is how the believing mind should respond to trials. To the believing mind, we look at trials as we should look at trials, as part of God's plan and purpose as a gracious God and as a kind God. These are not random, wandering, unorchestrated events that are meaningless and purposeless. No. This is

always God working all things together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. Always. Always.

In Hebrews 10:34, the scripture says, "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property." You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property. That's crazy. The verse doesn't end there. "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one." Something was stolen from them. Something was taken from them. But their eyes, yes, sorry for the loss, there's loss, but their eyes go beyond the loss and say, "We have a better possession and an enduring one." We lay up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust doesn't corrupt, where thieves can't break through and steal. God's keeping that for us. When we get robbed down here below, we're reminded of how perfect heaven is to come and all that we have up in store there that will never be taken from us. So they joyfully accept the plundering of their property, knowing that they have a better and enduring substance in heaven. You see what's happening here? This is the point.

We rejoice in our sufferings, as Paul says, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. There was this woman by the name of Elizabeth Prentiss who wrote the commonly known hymn "More Love to Thee, O Christ." And she wrote it in the midst of deep trial. She had lost her three-year-old son, who died to what appears to be meningitis. And a few months after that, her newborn daughter Bessie died to bacterial infection. And she penned the words of this hymn, but she didn't share them with anyone, not even her husband, for 13 years. After 13 years, her husband, she shared them with her husband, her husband learned about them, and encouraged her to publish this hymn, which we sing today.

And one of the verses of this hymn goes like this: "Let sorrow do its work, send grief and pain. Sweet are your messengers, sweet their refrain, when they can sing with me, more love, O Christ, to Thee, more love to Thee, more love to Thee." You see what's happening? "Let sorrow do its work, send grief and pain. Sweet are your messengers, sorrow and pain, God's messengers. Sweet their refrain, sweet their song, when they can sing with me, more love, O Christ, to you." You see, they take on a sweetness as they come into our lives and drive our hearts to Christ and cause us to look up and cry out, "More love, O Christ, to you, more love to you." When the trials wean us from this world and cause us to be lacking in nothing and contented in our Savior, they make us cry, "More love, O Christ, to you."

And George, her husband, wrote these words about her. He said, "Never again was it exactly the same life." It changed her. He said, "She had entered into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and the new experience wrought

a great change in her entire being." Of course, I don't wish this upon any of us, the pain and the sorrow and the heartache. But take courage, dear people of God, that if ever something like this happened to any one of us, or whatever it is that you're going through right now, you can understand and know and believe that these are God's messengers to cause you to sing, "More love, O Christ, to you."

What is your trial this morning? What are you trying to make sense of in your life? Well, here is the purpose, or one of the purposes, in trials, and that is to make you like Jesus. Perhaps we have problems and struggles with our trials and fail and struggle to accept them because perhaps this morning, you're more concerned about comfort than Christlikeness. I think that's a big one for us, isn't it? We want comfort more than Christlikeness. But God says Christlikeness comes through discomfort, and we wrestle with that. Sometimes we're on covetousness over completeness and contentment in Christ. There's more that we want to do. There's more that we want to experience. There's more that we want to have. What about "All I Have Is Christ"? Job experienced this, and I'll share this verse in closing when he said these words: "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tried me, I shall come out as gold. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my portion of food." That's a man stripped bare who has for his food and sustenance the promises of God. "I tested you in the wilderness," said God, "so that you might know that a man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." That's what God's doing in your trial, causing you to hold on to Christ with both hands. Let's pray.