

All of us at some stage or other will face trials in life

If you haven't faced one yet I'm pretty sure you will

They're not nice, if they were they wouldn't be called trials

I'm sure many of us here are far more familiar with painful trials than I am

You may be undergoing a particularly difficult trial right now

So let me start by saying It's not my intention to offend you today

What we're about to work through is going to be quite hard for some of us to take in

But I do believe that as we get a better grasp of God's purposes in our trials it will be of enormous help to us

We we'll encouragement in the darkest of places

When we're really hurting

So please bear with me if I hit a nerve this morning

You've probably caught on by now that we're beginning a new series today in the book of James

Over the next 5 or 6 weeks we're going to be looking at this very challenging and practical letter

Today we're looking at 1:1-12, so It would be really helpful if we had our Bibles open there – its page 1215

Now the church to which James addressed his letter were very familiar with trials

In vs1 he calls them the 12 tribes in the dispersion – or the Diaspora

A phrase used to describe God's people Israel who were scattered, living amongst pagan nations

James is writing to a group of Christians in that situation

Surrounded by a rebellious world that does not know or seek God

It's safe to say they faced persecution because of their faith

But James doesn't makes a big deal about that particular trial in the rest of his letter

Most of the time he refers instead to situations within the Christian community

Let me give you some few examples – flick over with me to chapter 2:1

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*

The rich were being favored over the poor

The poor were being maligned – some of the brothers were undergoing the trial of poverty and the rest of the community weren't making things any easier

They were being oppressed by the rich as well – 2:6, Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court.

In chapter 4 we see that there are fights and quarrels, some leading to murder

Again in chapter 5 we read of how the rich have maligned their righteous workers, and not paid them as they deserve

And James is ultimately concerned with how brothers who are suffering would respond to these various trials

What would be their attitude to these hardships

That's the core of what he's talking about in our verses today

How the Christian should respond to trials and why

How the Christian should respond to trials and why

James starts in vs2 by saying: count it all joy brothers when you face trials of various kinds

Hang on sounds a bit that's weird doesn't it?

Rejoice in trials

Maybe James has been under the sun too long

Rejoicing is the last thing most people have on their minds when facing trials

But that is what he says –

He says to Christians facing trials of various kinds - rejoice!

And the rest of our passage today helps us understand that statement

James shows us that, for the Christian, this response to trials shouldn't be that strange at all –

We are given two reasons

– the first one is in verse 3-4 and the second in vs12

And In between, in vs5-8 we're told how to grow in this response to trials

And then in vs9-10 we're shown an outworking of this response in the real world

And we're going to go through in that order

First the reasons, then the means, and finally the example

So please come back with me to vs2

*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 might be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*

Notice – James doesn't say we're to enjoy the trials themselves

We're not to relish in pain and tribulations like a bunch of masochists

Trials are painful, we won't enjoy them

Instead James says rejoice when you face them

Because as we do they test our faith

That's the progression in vs3 isn't it

When we come up against trials they test our faith

They test our dependence on God

Our trust in him

James says something really good can come out of the testing of our faith

In the midst of the suffering something incredibly valuable can grow

Steadfastness

That's what this testing produces

Steadfastness

So what does it mean to be steadfast?

Well, if a ship drops anchor and the anchor digs into the seabed and becomes grounded

It's considered steadfast

In other words it's not budging

Throw all you want at it, that anchor isn't going anywhere

Which means thankfully the ship isn't either

That's what James means by steadfastness

It's the ability to stand firm and rooted in the faith no matter what is thrown at us

To persevere through whatever trial we're facing

Like that anchor holding the ship in a storm

Now growing in this steadfastness will take time

We're told to let it have its full effect

In other words it must finish its work

We need to continue persevering in trials

But why?

Why is the development of this steadfastness so important?

Well James says its valuable because it leads to Christian maturity

Vs4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, *that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*

By persevering through these trials we gain a deeper and stronger faith!

We become mature Christians!

Many of you know I'm a big movie fan

I especially like the big war films that are set in ancient and medieval times

Movies like Gladiator, Brave heart and Troy

Andrew and Judi know this because last year, for Christmas, they got me kingdom of heaven

Orlando Bloom, is cast in the lead role as a blacksmith

In one of the scenes you see Orlando half way through making a long sword

He takes some metal which will be the blade of the sword and shoves it into a blazing hot fire

And once it's white hot Orlando takes it out it, puts it on a large anvil and hammers it very hard

He repeats this process again and again

The sword goes into the fire  
It comes back out white hot and Orlando hammers it again  
And as this process continues the sword becomes stronger and stronger  
More able to withstand more and more force  
Until the point where it's highly unlikely anything will ever break it  
You see our faith in trials is a bit like that sword  
The trial itself is harsh, like the blazing fire or the heavy hammer  
But the process is very valuable because through it we develop perseverance  
Like the sword that gets stronger each time it is struck  
So every time we face trials, we have the opportunity to become stronger  
To the point where we can stand any trial without wavering  
To the point where we are mature  
God uses these trials to grow us up  
So that we might be perfect or in other words mature  
That's what we want as Christians isn't it?  
To be growing in maturity  
But as we can see the road to Christian maturity is not an easy one  
It is one of trials  
Not to say it's the whole of Christian life is one miserable episode after another  
It's not  
But we will face trials – and when we do we will have a choice  
To persevere through them and become stronger  
Or give up, turn away, pack it all in  
Decide it's not worth enduring  
That's a terrible mistake if we do that  
Because we underestimate what our faith is worth

We fail to realise why it's worth suffering for

Because as we persevere in our trials, we are being prepared for something incredible

The second reason why James gives for why the Christian can rejoice in trial-

It's down in vs12

*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*

Here is the goal of the testing we face

That once we have stood firm

Once we have persevered through our trials to the end

We will receive what is of infinite value

A gift that makes the trials and pain, as difficult as they are, worth while

The crown of life – eternal life under the blessing of God's rule

That which is promised to those who stand firm

Who continue to trust in Christ and suffer for his sake no matter what!

As our faith is tested we are being preparing for this glorious future with our Lord

So when we face our trials we'll need to look forward

To not only realise its worth in the present day – causing us to grow in maturity

But also to see what this testing is preparing us for

When the trials get tough, when we feel like giving up – this future hope is what will keep us going

That if once we have remained steadfast, we have stood the rest we will receive the crown of life

So those are the two reasons James puts forth

Rejoice in your trials because by persevering through them you will grow in maturity

You will become stronger in your faith

And rejoice because your faith, which is being strengthened, is heading for the crown of life

The ultimate blessing – eternal life with our Lord, where pain and suffering and death will be no more

James realises that some of his readers aren't fully mature

That they are going to struggle with the concept of rejoicing in trials

They need God's wisdom

So Vs5

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

That is James' answer if we're struggling to respond to our trials rightly

We're to pray to God for wisdom

Wisdom is a central theme in the letter of James

Throughout we are shown that there are two types of wisdom

There is God's wisdom which we learn when we feed on his word

And there is worldly, earthly wisdom

That's all around us

It's in the cinemas

We read it in the newspapers

We hear it when we talk to our friends in the workplace

It's the kind of wisdom that is closed off

It doesn't understand the big picture

It views life as a rollercoaster of up's and down's from start to finish and we're just along for the ride

And once you get off that's it

So there's no point to our suffering it's just there and best avoided if possible

There's nothing more

If we suffer we suffer, no good can come of it

Taking joy in trials and suffering – that's just silly

And the danger is that as Christians we can be influenced by this wisdom

We can look at our trials with worldly wisdom

And James doesn't want that for the brothers

He wants them to understand that these trials are not random unexplainable useless events

These trials actually have a purpose - a very useful purpose

God who is all loving and in complete control is putting them through them for good reason

Because they're so valuable to their faith

So he says to his readers – if any of you lack wisdom ask God

But there is a condition attached:

Vs 6

*But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one 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*

James gives a serious warning

We're told that the one who asks for wisdom must not doubt

If he does he shouldn't expect to receive anything, absolutely anything from the Lord!

That's scary when you first read it, isn't it

Is James really saying that unless a person works themselves up into a state where they have ridded all doubting from their minds

They won't receive anything!

Friends, if that's the case we should be alarmed

Don't we doubt sometimes?

Don't we actually wonder to ourselves – will God really give this to me? When we pray

Does James really mean this?

That when we do doubt, we shouldn't expect to receive anything

I wonder how many of my prayers would go unanswered if this was the case

Quite a few I imagine

Thankfully I don't think that is what James meant when he used the word doubt

We can work out who this doubter is by looking at the other word James uses to describe him

‘double minded’

he is a double minded man, unstable in all he does

He uses this phrase when describing the person in chapter 4

Flick over with me

In vs 3 we’re told his motives in prayers – you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions

Half of him is living for the world and the other half when it suits him is in God’s camp

The kind of person who likes the sound of Christian thinking, who hangs out in Christian circles

But the truth is his heart isn’t really in it

His unstable

Like a wave of the sea that is tossed by the wind

He’s all over the place

He asks God for wisdom, but doesn’t ask for the right reasons

God gives us wisdom so that we can persevere in our trials and grow up in maturity

But the double minded man, he asks for God’s wisdom half heartedly

Because he still belongs to the world – he doesn’t really know God at all

Perhaps he’s just looking for the easy way out from his hardships

And when this man hears the godly response to trials he laughs

He thinks it’s ludicrous

Because that is how Godly wisdom appears to friends of the world

Godly wisdom is for those who know God through Christ

But to his enemies it appears as foolishness

Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians that the teaching of the cross is folly to those who are perishing

At the cross we see God’s wisdom

Something wonderful coming out of a terrible trial

New life being made available through Jesus death

But it's just pure foolishness to the worldly double minded man

It just doesn't make sense

James is giving a severe warning to pretenders here

Those who pray to God for worldly reasons

They shouldn't expect to receive anything from Him

No wisdom, nothing

But there is a warning for us here too brothers and sisters

Are we sometimes guilty of asking God for wisdom for the wrong reasons?

God's wish for us is that by his wisdom we would be enduring and persevering through our trials – that we would be growing in maturity, preparing for the crown of glory

Is that why we want God's wisdom?

So that we would be counting out trials as joy?

That we would realise their worth and be persevering in them?

*Pause*

Finally in vs9-11 we see what joy in the face of trials looks like in the real world

There is a poor brother and a rich brother

James speaks wisdom into their circumstances

He says to the lowly brother - boast in your exaltation!

In other words rejoice in your high position, even though you are poor!

No doubt this sounds like further foolishness to the double minded man

But James is not saying something foolish here

He's saying something very wise

He's speaking to this lowly brother having understood what really matters

James doesn't see him as poor

Because he is a fellow brother

One in the faith – trusting in Jesus

So this guy is in store for something far greater than anything the world could offer

Though he maybe suffering from poverty now, he can still look forward to the day when he will receive the crown of life

Not only that but the trials of poverty that he is enduring are preparing him for that day!

As he perseveres through his poverty his faith is being strengthened like that sword in the furnace

The faith that will keep him steadfast till he receives his crown of life

Then we have the second man

One who is wealthy

James tells this man to do the opposite to the lowly brother

Instead of boasting in exultation, boast in your humiliation

Again that would sound crazy to the world wouldn't it!

This guys is sorted isn't he?

He's wealthy

He can afford anything he wants

Power, prestige, toys, nice holidays

If you're rich you've got it all – so the world says

But James says boast in your humiliation

The rich man must not delude himself in thinking he is at the top

But instead he is to remember his lowly status

That he is as dependant on God as the lowly brother

It could be very tempting for him to think he's superior

If he eats better food, lives in a better house, rides a faster camel

The lies of the world could cloud his judgment

So James says boast in your humiliation

Realise all your wealth is going to come to nothing in the long run

Because just like the lowly brother he is a sinner  
In need of God's mercy  
He must remember that he is not self dependant  
But rather very dependant on God  
That he will not receive the crown of life through earthly riches  
But through faith  
Trusting in Christ's death on the cross for him  
That is his humiliation – that he is entirely dependant on Christ  
I remember last year going for lunch with Andrew and our Dean Jason  
And as we were parking up outside the restaurant somewhere in the city centre  
we noticed something rather strange on the pavement a few yards away  
It was a man  
Lying down on his back  
A group of taxi drivers were standing around him  
Andrew being a doctor immediately ran across to see he could help the man  
It didn't take long to work out he couldn't  
The man had been dead for at least half an hour  
He was probably in his early 40's  
Wearing a rather nice business suit  
He had a nice watch  
And he was clutching a decent brief case in his right hand  
He was either on his way to or coming back from a business meeting  
Clearly, this man had no idea he was about to die  
But in an instant he was gone, he had faded  
He echoed James' words in vs11  
So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits

When we have God's wisdom we do realise what's truly important

We are given a real perspective of our circumstances, especially when we face trials

The lowly man can rejoice even though he is facing the trial of poverty

He is growing in preparedness for the day when the crown of life will be his

But the rich brother needs to be very careful

To remember that his earthly wealth will be gone one day

He mustn't put his security in them

Instead he is to boast of his humble state

He is a sinner dependant on Gods grace for his eternal riches

So what can we take from this passage today as we close

In three words:

don't give up

don't give up

When facing trials stand firm

And when we struggle to rejoice when facing them – pray

Ask God for wisdom

Go back to his word, go back to the cross

Pray that as you read of his wisdom he'd cause it to take hold

To understand the value of trials, painful though they maybe

And Look forward

Remember what awaits us as we stand firm

Eternal life, with no more pain, no more trials – just total peace and love with God and each other

Don't just look forward

Look back to

Reflect on God's wisdom expressed at the cross

The example our Lord Jesus has left for us to follow

His journey to glory was the hardest

The trials that he endured were greater than anything we will face

He experienced hell for us

He took all the punishment for our sin

Experiencing the full wrath of God in our place, that we might be forgiven

And having persevered, having been obedient to his fathers will to the very last he was raised up

God exalted him to the highest place

And we can look forward to our exultation because of what he has done

Let me finish by quoting a book called the heavenly man

It's about a brother called Yun who suffered at the hands of the Chinese government

This is the advice he gives to those who asked him, what can we pray for you?

He said:

*"Don't pray for the persecution to stop! We shouldn't pray for a lighter load to carry, but a stronger back to endure! Then the world will see that God is with us, empowering us to live in a way that reflects his love and power"*

Brother Yun was a man of God's wisdom

He understood the value of the trials he was facing

Let's pray