

# James 1:1-8

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now please turn back to the letter of James. Page 1011. Let's pray one more time as we come to God's word. Let's pray one more time as we come to God's word. Let's pray.

Father speak in these moments we pray. Do that work in our hearts by your Holy Spirit that we need. And change us to be more like your son because we ask it in his name. Amen.

Graham Linehan, the comedian, you might know his work, most famous work is Father Ted. He was cancelled recently by the comedy community that he belonged to for taking a stand against the trans issue.

And for Graham Linehan, his refusal to back down on the simple point that children should not be mutilated for ideological reasons cost him his marriage, his professional reputation, and his livelihood.

Now Linehan is an atheist so we view the world in very different ways. But for his resolve to stand against the madness of the culture on this point, I admire him.

[ 1 : 22 ] But as I was listening to an interview with him recently, I was kind of struck or it occurred to me that his case poses a challenge and raises a question.

A challenge and a question for the church in these days in which we live. The challenge comes in his willingness to stand up at huge personal cost.

He lost his marriage, his livelihood, and his professional reputation. And he did that because he believes that there are things that are right and things that are wrong and things that are true and things that aren't true.

And it struck me. Am I prepared to be so courageous? Are we prepared to be so courageous? It's a challenge. The question that his case raises is, well, as the church of Jesus Christ, how should we live?

As the people of God, how should we live in a culture that does this kind of thing? In a culture that is shaped and informed in this way?

[ 2 : 33 ] Aaron Wren is an American social commentator who you can come across online, AaronWren.com. He has observed how the church has been received, particularly in the American context, but in Western culture, how the church has been received over the last several decades.

And he has developed this way of thinking about the church and the culture. And he describes it as a positive, a neutral, and a negative world.

So the positive, he thinks there was a time when being a Christian was viewed in the culture as a positive thing. In so far as if you put, I belong to a church on your CV, that would be of benefit to you.

That would be viewed positively. If you wrote church elder on your CV, well, they would take you very seriously. That was the positive world. Then there was a shift. The neutral world was a time when being a Christian was viewed as neither here nor there.

That was okay for you if that's what you're into, but it's not for me. It might be church for you. It's golf for me. It might be church for you. It might be new atheism for me, whatever it is.

[ 3 : 38 ] But most importantly, actually, that was fine. We could agree to differ. We could have arguments. We could disagree. But we would all largely get along. That was the neutral world. But Ren talks about the shift that has happened more recently.

Now, he's writing in an American context, and he ties it to particular points in American history recently. But I think the way of viewing things works really well for all of us. The negative world is where we are now.

There's been another shift. And what that means is that being a Christian puts you at a cultural disadvantage. We're no longer viewed just as a bit dumb. We're dangerous.

We're no longer thick. We are a threat. And where there's a danger and where there's a threat, what happens? Well, that needs to be driven out. And so there's hostility.

We face, in our day, hostility like we haven't experienced for over a century in this country. You are more likely than ever, more likely than ever probably in the last century, to be ostracized by your friendship group and dubbed as a bigot because your allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ won't allow you to cheer along at the things that the culture cheers along at.

[ 4 : 50 ] Because you can't endorse what the Lord Jesus refuses to endorse. Because you won't do that, you're a bigot. You're more likely than ever to find yourself in a disciplinary hearing at work or perhaps even to lose your job because your allegiance to truth means that you won't play along with the lie around, for example, what is a man and what is a woman.

I was talking to somebody just last night who, in their job, if they are to be promoted to the next level, they have to not just kind of accept that this is part of the work, but they have to endorse a particular policy that as a Christian they're not able to endorse.

So there is a ceiling now. If you're going to be a faithful Christian, in his industry there is a ceiling over which you can't climb. And you will be inevitably vilified for holding the view and refusing to endorse that.

Persecution, rejection, struggles. This is the negative world. And the letter of James, to say written by the apostle, was written to Christians in such a world.

Verse 1, when he defines his audience as the 12 tribes in the dispersion, he is writing to Jewish Christians who are mentioned in Acts, just after the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts chapter 7.

[ 6 : 18 ] So in Acts 8 chapter 1, Acts 8 chapter 4, Acts 11, he talks about those who were dispersed. They were pushed off into exile around the time because they were followers of Jesus.

They're among the first converts to Christianity. James refers to them, you see down in verse 18 here, as firstfruits. The word that he uses there is the same word the apostle Paul uses in Romans 16, and again in 1 Corinthians 16, to refer to the first group of believers in a particular area.

These are amongst the very first believers in the Lord Jesus Christ in the history of the church. And they are driven out of Jerusalem by the overzealous Jewish religious establishment simply because they follow Christ.

They left their homes, their work, and their communities under pressure from a religio-political system intent on bringing them back to Judaism by any means possible, including things like killing others like Stephen, kind of violence and torture that saw him killed.

And James writes to address the problems that have arisen because of this pressure, because of this opposition. Pressure and opposition bring out the worst in us. On the one hand, or they can bring out the worst in us.

[ 7 : 41 ] On the one hand, it can make us fight in the wrong kind of way. So our anger at injustice, our frustration at abuse, sort of thing that is happening here in chapter 1, verse 19, can lead us to respond in kind.

So we pursue life on the same terms as our opponents. We operate by the same values, chapter 2 in James. When we are criticized, chapter 3, we fight back with a tongue lashing of our own.

And this includes chapters 4 and 5, turning on our allies who we don't think are really engaged in the fight the way they should be. Because they don't see things the way we do, we turn on them. Question their commitment, question their faithfulness.

So on the one hand, pressure can make us fight in the wrong way. On the other hand, there is a temptation to completely capitulate, to roll over because of fear or because simply we don't want the hassle.

To say chapter 2, James chapter 2, what's going on there is to say that we still believe, but we step back from the fight. To still believe, but become indistinct from the world around us.

[ 8 : 52 ] Because it's too awkward. We don't want the hassle or we're scared. Or we care about certain things so much that we're prepared to step back from faithfulness. We say we still believe, we still go through the motions, we might have a very kind of somewhat consistent private faith, but we're unprepared to take the stand that we need to.

When James talks in chapter 1, verse 27, have a look down there, verse 27, he talks about being unstained by the world. What he's saying is we can't imbibe the same mindset as the culture.

A culture in the context that he's talking about here, where it's okay to ignore widows and orphans, to see them as an inconvenience rather than a responsibility. Where lines are drawn between the

wealthy and the poor.

Chapter 2, it runs all the way through the letter actually. And where selfishness rules the day. To be unstained by the world is to take a different mindset to those kind of values.

So for James' hearers, this letter is a call to obedience in the face of a kind of opposition that is drawing them into destructive ways of thinking and acting. They need to decide which way they'll go.

[10:05] And so do we. Now we might wish it was otherwise, but depending on our personality, this is how we instinctively react, isn't it? We fight like the culture, or we blend in with the culture.

Think about the way things went down during COVID. The church was under pressure in a really pronounced way. The state told us we couldn't meet. Many thought we could meet. Many thought we shouldn't meet.

How those two groups behaved, and how they treated each other particularly within church fellowships, was not the church's finest hour. So how do we respond to the growing tide of opposition?

When you do experience this kind of rejection, the rejection of those around you that costs you something more than just your pride. It's no longer the case that we're just a bit offended, or we feel a bit rebuffed by others, but actually it costs us more than that.

What happens when the state is reaching into your business? It's this great behemoth that has established itself as both Lord, that is, you must obey, and Savior. When you get into trouble, we're the ones that will help you.

[11:10] When we live in that context, how do we respond? What do we do with the anger that we feel towards legalized abortion, or our despair in the face of...

What do we do when we despair in the face of the mutilation of children who are confused about their gender?

These are relevant questions. So, we need this letter to remind us what it means to live in exile. We need to be reminded what it means to live faithfully in exile. And James begins, he begins his instruction by calling us to settle in our hearts and minds three convictions that need to frame how we think and how we act in the negative world.

Three convictions that need to frame how we think and act in the negative world, and these convictions will underpin almost everything else he says in the letter. Joy, dependence, and faith.

[12:29] Dependence and faith sound similar. I hope the distinction will become clear as we go through. Joy, dependence, and faith. If we get these in place, they'll help us with much of everything else that James has to say.

Point number one, joy. He says, rejoice in trials because of what they are achieving. Verse two, 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. Remember, he's saying this to people who have lost everything.

Those are the kind of trials that he's talking about. He's not specific about the nature of the trials. They are various. And he doesn't suggest that we rejoice in the actual suffering itself.

Rejection and persecution aren't themselves things to enjoy. We don't experience rejection and suffering and think, ha, wonderful. But they are, James' hearers, are to rejoice in the process of suffering trials and testing because of what that process is accomplishing.

[13:46] James doesn't want his hearers to walk into the fire, but he does want them to rejoice when they feel its flames because under God, these trials are taking them to a destination.

Verse 3, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. Spiritual steadfastness is what we all need. Endurance.

The word has the connotations of perseverance, spiritual toughness. This is what is required if we will faithfully serve God all the way to the end in a culture like ours. How do we get that toughness? We get that toughness by being put through trials and prevailing. Now, we understand what this is like in the physical realm. If you're going to get fitter or you're going to get stronger, you need to do things that are difficult.

You need to do things that are a trial. Things that you feel at first that you can't accomplish. whether it's lifting weights or going for a walk or going for a run or whatever it might be. At the start, you feel weak and it's painful.

[ 14 : 51 ] But it's the process that makes you grow. And if you're going to grow, if you're going to get stronger, you're going to get fit, there is no other way to get there and there's no shortcut.

Our trials make us feel weak. Our trials are painful. But if we receive them from God as his means of growing us up, we can rejoice that we're actually getting stronger.

And it's that kind of spiritual strength that will lead us to maturity. Verse 4, and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect. The word literally means mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

Trials create steadfastness and steadfastness in turn creates maturity. I was saying to the children before in their bit of Sunday school this morning, it's the same with anything we do that we need to learn in order to grow.

Think about when you were learning to write, holding a pen, drawing the letters. It was really tedious. It was really difficult. Your hand got sore. But what invariably happens over time, you go through that process, and it's no longer a struggle.

[ 16 : 05 ] You're much more competent. You're mature and able to write. That is what the process accomplishes.

And this is what, this maturity is what James' hearers, what all of us are going to need, we're going to be effective as agents of Christ in his coming kingdom. So trials, I don't know what you're going through at the moment.

This may be very relevant for you right now, but it's important to say that trials are not a sign that God is annoyed with you or that he's picking on you. Quite the opposite.

In fact, one of the striking things about this letter is how much James is simply echoing the words of Jesus. I've chosen this series to follow the Sermon on the Mount for this reason. So remember, Matthew chapter 5, blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Rejoice in trials because this is the way that it has always been, James is saying.

[ 17 : 20 ] And he isn't, by quoting Jesus here, he isn't just trying to give authority to what he's saying. He's also calling to mind the first command that Jesus gives to anyone who will be his disciple. Do you remember?

If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Discipleship 101 is the suffering of the cross-shaped path that Jesus walked.

It is the path of mockery and rejection and suffering because that is the path that Jesus walked. And that is exactly the path that James' hearers are experiencing.

This is the Christian life. And it's the Christian life because it was Christ's life. So Hebrews chapter 2 verse 10, For it was fitting that he, God, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect.

How? Through suffering. Hebrews 5 verse 8, Although he was a son, the Lord Jesus, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, being matured, he was designed, designated by God, a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

[ 18 : 35 ] Trials are the means God uses to mature, to perfect all his children. As it was for Christ, so it is for us. Trials are how he gets us off our training wheels into maturity and onto completeness, to glory.

And it has to be this way. It has to be this way because it was that way for Jesus. If we want the resurrection glory, we have to go the way of the cross.

If we want vindication on life, we have to go the way of humiliation and death. The one inevitably precedes the other. And this is why we don't despair in the negative world.

Look, if this world is all there is and we aren't in the hands of a sovereign God who is our loving Heavenly Father, then all the apocalyptic rhetoric that permeates our culture is completely understandable.

The nihilism that I hear in lots of social commentary makes sense in the negative world without God. But that's not our posture as the church. That is not the posture of followers of the Lord Jesus Christ because our trials have a goal.

[ 19 : 49 ] They come in all shapes and sizes. The way we get misrepresented, the lies and the abuse, the exclusion and the injustice, the state sticking its nose into our families, the torpedoing of our career ambitions, and the damage that the stress of all of that does to our physical and

emotional health.

all of those trials, in all of this, God is refining us and he's strengthening us and he's growing us up on our way to glory and that's why we rejoice.

Yes, we feel weak. Yes, we feel like it's hopeless. But it's not. It's like when you've been able to lift a certain weight on the bench press for however long it's been and you put more weight on and you think, oh, I've got weaker.

But gradually you're able to lift it, you get stronger. God is refining us and strengthening us and he's growing us up as he gets us to glory. Rejoice because of what your trials are accomplishing.

But of course, this response doesn't come naturally to us. In fact, it sounds a bit crazy to talk about joy in that context which is why we need to read on. What do we do and we can't rejoice?

[ 21 : 07 ] Well, here's our second point. Depend. Depend. Go to God for wisdom to see trials this way. Verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him.

Now, you'll know this verse because anytime you're not sure what to do in life, some well-meaning soul will have reminded you of it. Ask for wisdom. God will give it. This verse isn't about asking God for guidance about how to make plans or about how to navigate a tricky life situation.

It is about asking for the ability to see your circumstances accurately and to keep trusting God with joy in whatever trials you're facing.

James is very practical. He knows that you'll only be able to do this if the Lord enables you. There is something unnatural about rejoicing in hardship and in trials.

So we need God to give us wisdom that we might see our circumstances and see not just our circumstances but the whole picture, the whole world that we might have our worldview framed by God.

[ 22 : 26 ] When did you last ask the Lord for wisdom in this way? When trials close in when we're suffering we usually cry out to God for grace maybe or mercy but when did you last ask him for wisdom?

Not knowledge or intelligence or the ability to understand more theology. Those are all good things of course. Not an end to trials. Not asking God for a life of comfort.

When did you last ask him for wisdom? It is a prayer did you see that he promises to answer? It will be given. And did you notice as well he gives it generously.

And we need to see that when we ask for wisdom we're asking for something very practical. And I don't just mean I know the old trope knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.

Ha ha. I know. I understand that. Very practical. No. What he's doing here remember his audience. James' audience is from a Jewish background and in Jewish mind wisdom meant the sort of practical righteousness that God required for everyday life.

[ 23 : 39 ] Which is why we have the book of Proverbs for example. That kind of very practical righteousness for everyday life. Wisdom is a life lived God's way. A life lived according to God's purpose and will.

A life lived to please him. And the ability to do that is what we ask for when we ask for wisdom.

When you're being squeezed by the culture this is actually what you need.

When there are tough ethical decisions to be made so when you have competing demands as it were that are upon you as a Christian so on the one hand you're called to provide for your family and on the other hand you're called to not glorify God and not glorify those things that God says you can't glorify you know there's a tough ethical decision to be made there you need wisdom.

You need wisdom in order to do the right thing in order to live obediently. When you're praying for someone who's struggling this is what you should ask for them. When you're supporting someone through hard times this is where you should point them.

When life is harder than hard ask God for wisdom for the ability as John Calvin says to submit to him in the endurance of evils under a due conviction that he so orders all things as to promote our salvation.

[ 25 : 06 ] Calvin is saying is you're asking him that you can submit to God in and through this whole situation trusting that the trials that you're going through are growing you up.

they are his means of getting you to glory. John Newton said everything is needful that he sends nothing can be needful that he withholds.

When we pray for wisdom we are asking to be able to say that of our trials and do it with conviction. Nothing is everything is needful that he sends.

That trial that has come into your life that opposition that persecution the Lord thinks you need it.

The infinitely wise God thinks that you need it in order to make you holy.

And those things that he keeps from you that you think you want nothing can be needful that he withholds. He deems that at the moment you don't need it. And so when we ask for wisdom we are asking to be able to say that of our trials.

[ 26 : 12 ] You say no no can't do that. I can't do that and I'm angry actually with him that he's put me here. Well you're right in one sense you can't rejoice in trials in your own strength but if we ask God he gives us what we need and he gives it generously.

So let's ask him for what he's promised. Whatever opposition you're facing simply because you're a Christian ask God for wisdom he has promised that he'll give it.

But there is a condition do you see that? Verse 6 there is a condition and here's our third conviction 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.

Point number three we need faith. We need to genuinely trust God. Remember Jesus Matthew 21 21 if you have faith and do not doubt you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

Asking for wisdom requires us to have faith that God knows what he's doing that his promises are true that he is making us steadfast and this is what we actually need.

[ 27 : 34 ] In our trials there is a big difference between asking God please take this struggle away I don't want it and please give me wisdom to endure in faith. one is about your personal comfort the other is acknowledging God's providence and the trial is a necessary and good thing for you.

One has you at the center the other has God at the center. And if we ask for wisdom when we really want comfort if we ask for wisdom we don't really think that that's what we need we're not going to get it.

So the trials won't achieve their aim and we end up stuck and that's when bitterness sets in and resentment and we spiral. James's imagery here describes us as double-minded now he'll revisit this idea later and so will we Lord willing.

He's saying we're blown all over the place. When we don't have the wisdom that we need we're blown all over the place looking two ways at once. The double-minded person literally two-souled person one that trusts God and one that doesn't John Bunyan Pilgrim's Progress describes this person as Mr. Facing Both Ways.

If our trials don't push us to rest on the truth on the promises of God there will be no calmness in our soul and no life of joy. James isn't demanding perfect faith.

[ 28 : 56 ] There's no such thing. Neither is he dismissing the person who is genuinely wrestling with doubt. He's not seeking to say it's all easy and this is a simple formula that you follow on happy days.

He is simply warning the person who doesn't really think that they need wisdom or the person that doesn't believe that God is good and can be trusted through their trials. It's easy to say the right things even in some cases to pray the right words but for our hearts to be divided to face two ways. It's easy for our desire for comfort to be in the driving seat to the degree that we back off from the faithfulness that God calls us to because it is too hard. We need to be honest with ourselves.

Perhaps we need to repent when this is the case and to ask the Lord for wisdom. He delights to give it. And do you see he delights to give it by the bucket load.

One theologian says this, God's picture brimming with wisdom is tilted over us. He is the God who continuously gives and he is waiting for us to ask. He gives it with ladles like all of his blessings.

[ 30 : 10 ] Not with teaspoons but with bucket loads. So ask him. Depend on him. in total faith that he will supply what you need to grow you to maturity and to get you to glory.

Then the trials of the negative world will achieve what God intends. And you can rejoice as you grow on and on and on to maturity.

Joy, dependence, and faith. Let's pray together. Thank you.