

James 1

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[0:00] If you turn back to James chapter 1, that would be great. Page 1011. So our modern ears, or post-modern ears, whatever kind of ears we have in this culture, there are many parts of the Bible that just sound utterly ludicrous, aren't they?

For to ask our neighbours. And I suspect we're going to put them in our top ten of statements. I think this statement of James, as he starts his letter, will be pretty near the top, wouldn't it? In our consumer culture. James chapter 1 verse 2.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. Can you imagine going to the camps in Calais? Oh, consider it all joy, my brothers, as I get back in my nice car to go home. Consider it all joy, your suffering.

Wandering the streets of Aleppo, or somewhere in Syria, bombed smithereens. Consider it all joy, my brothers. To the prisoner, who hasn't got out for years, political prisoner in Iraq, or Iran rather. Count it all joy, my brother. Or to the child who blew it at school. To my child or your child when he comes home. Consider it all joy. It's counterintuitive, isn't it?

[1:16] As I was preparing this this week, I was so struck by even the trials I know that are going on in the church family, let alone the ones I do not know about. So I'm sure there are many I do not know. So many trials, trials at work, trials without work, trials of health.

Difficulties in relationships, trials in marriages, trials with not being married, trials of physical health, with mental health, struggles with relationships, elderly parents to look after, young children to care for.

So many pressures. We all know there are various trials, don't we? And yet, what worldview, what religion actually enables people to cope with trials?

21st century consumerism certainly doesn't, does it? What's the solution? What's the solution? What's the solution? Well, you either anesthetize the pain or you escape it somewhere.

Buddhism. What's the solution? Buddhism. Suffering is just an illusion. Islam. Well, it's the will of Allah, we just get on.

[2:25] The Bible is far more real, isn't it? About dealing with the trials that come. So no wonder James starts straight away, without any much to do, straight in with this message.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. So who on earth is James to say this? Well, he's inspired by the Holy Spirit, that's why he's writing. He is almost certainly, or most probably, the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who'd rejected all Jesus' claims in his life.

Here, 1 Corinthians 15, we find the resurrected Lord appeared to him. And so he becomes a believer and a pillar of the church in Jerusalem, as Galatians 2 puts it. And who is James making this outrageous command to?

Well, he tells us it's the 12 tribes in the dispersion. Probably, people from his church in Jerusalem, who had fled the persecution in Jerusalem, that we read about in Acts chapter 8.

And now establishing a new life somewhere outside Israel. So he's writing to people he knows. He's had enough afflictions in his own life, and he knows enough of the details of their lives, to be able to write to them about sufferings and trials.

[3:38] And do you notice what he's saying here? It's a command, isn't it? Count it all joy, my brothers. This is what you're to do as a command addressed to our minds and our wills.

He doesn't say feel happy. He says count it, consider it, reckon it. Estimate these trials as joy. Now, joy is not the same as happiness, of course.

But how on earth can we consider trials joy? How can we consider it joy when we get the bad diagnosis? Or whatever it is in your life.

Well, James gives us the rationale for his command, the resources for keeping it, real life examples, so you see what it means. And finally mentions the reward.

First of all, the rationale. What is the rationale? Well, it's there in verses 3 and 4, isn't it? For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And that steadfastness have its full effect.

[4 : 38] That you may be perfect and complete, lucky and nothing. I have taken to looking at the Brentford FC website. It's part of my new calling as a church plant at Brentford. And a couple of weeks ago, after a particularly awful result, they won yesterday, hopefully they'll be getting well.

But after a particularly bad result, one of the players in the blog had said how they had a really good week in training, working really hard, they'd all had a lot of pain, but it's going to be worth it. What was he saying?

Yes, we suffered, but it's worthwhile for the result. We want to become more complete, more mature, more perfect footballers. So we don't want to be propping up the bottom of the table of the championship at the end of the season.

See, knowing where they're going, or knowing where they want to go, makes the suffering and pain worthwhile. And that's really what James is saying, isn't it? These trials are not going to be accidental.

They have a good purpose in your life. And that is that you may be, verse 4, verse 4, perfect and complete, wacky and nothing. It talks, verse 4, in verse 3 about the testing of faith, producing steadfastness.

[5 : 43] The word translated steadfastness there has this idea of bearing up under a weight. It's the kind of idea of someone staggering along under a big weight, holding it up for a long time.

That they're steadfast to stay there with their arms aloft doing it. And muscles, of course, if you're going to be like that, you need to exercise your muscles, don't you? There is a reason I'm a 10-7 weekling. I don't actually exercise my muscles enough.

If I want to be stronger, I need to get down to the gym and do some bench pressing or something. Well, James says your faith works like that. As your faith is tested, as it is exercised, so it produces steadfastness.

But steadfastness isn't even the final goal, is it? The final goal, verse 4, is to be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But you see the second command there? Let steadfastness have its full effect.

You need to cooperate with this testing. In effect, James is saying, don't waste your pain. Yes, your trials might be painful, but they've got a purpose. They can be useful. And James is assuming here the great biblical truth that every event in our life, no matter how sad, comes from the hand of a loving Father, the Father of the heavenly lights, who gives good gifts, as he says later on, So James is saying, don't waste your pain.

[7 : 07] Count it joy when you meet those trials, because if you let that steadfastness have its work, you will be mature and complete. Now, if you think for a moment, who is the most mature Christian you look up to you've come across in your life?

What is he or she like? If I think about that, I think of a man who for over 20 years was fighting cancer. And yet he's a man of incredible godliness and gentleness and wisdom.

A man who even in his late 70s is always interested in meeting other people and learning about their cultures and meeting young people and learning about what they're up to and getting into their music.

He's just incredibly godly and patient. Could he be like that if he hadn't been for cancer? I guess not.

As John Piper once said, the greener grass is greener, but it has no nutritional value. The greener grass is greener, but it has no nutritional value. And we all long for green grass, don't we? We all long for a nice holiday in the summer, whatever it is that floats your boat.

[8 : 18] But the greener grass is greener, but it has no nutritional value. If we're going to work towards godliness, if we're going to become godly and perfect and mature, as the Lord wants for us, then it will be hard on its way.

If we want to be mature believers, we need to cooperate with trials the Lord says. Now this isn't stoicism. It's stoicism. It's not British stiff upper lip. oh, I'm going to do my best here. No, because James is going to talk about the resources we need to be able to do this.

But it is the truth that we can, we're commanded to rejoice in trials and to cooperate with them that we might become perfect and mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Now if we truly grasp this, how might it change the way we talk to each other? Do you think? I don't know about you, but I'm often given to whinging. How are you?

But I was going to hospital again last week. It's so easy to whinge, isn't it? It's a very British characteristic. It is a great Scottish characteristic. We're good at whinging. Apologies, Will, then, if you think I'm wrong on that, but you can correct me afterwards.

[9 : 32] But if we really grasped that every hard thing in our life, every triumph, every disappointment, every sadness, every complicated situation that's too difficult for us, is actually something the living God can use in our lives so we might be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Wouldn't that change the way we talk to each other? Wouldn't it change the way we pray for each other? I mean, yes, it's right to pray for good health. It's right to pray for jobs to be provided, and so on and so forth.

It's good to pray those things. The Lord Jesus teaches us, doesn't he? He can pray for our daily bread, and all of that is incorporated in it. But shouldn't we go a bit further as well, and pray that the treasure of the trial will be formed within us as we go?

That actually, our friends who are suffering will become more complete and perfect through it. That we as a church will become more complete through it.

This is the rationale James gives for us to consider trials all joy. But it's one thing to know that, it's another thing to do it, isn't it? I mean, I know I ought to do more stretching exercises so that actually I can move more easily and run after Zoe when she goes running in the park or something.

[10 : 50] But I'm really bad at doing it. I need some kind of resource to help me do it. So where are the resources that we can actually count trials pure joy? Well, James comes on to them.

What would you expect the main resource to be? Count it all joy, brothers. So, pray the Lord will give you strength and stamina. So pray the Lord will fill you with the sense of his love. Pray the Lord will give you his spirit so that you can endure.

Well, James, that's actually not where James goes. He goes to a more profound level. Here we get in, having seen the rationale, we get the resources. Look at 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, James hasn't changed the subject here. If you look down to verse 12, he's still talking about trials. But here's the resources we need so that we can count trials of pure joy.

We need wisdom. Now, what is wisdom? Well, wisdom is not information. I'm sure you all know, I've heard the old humorous definition of the difference between wisdom and knowledge.

[11 : 55] So knowledge is knowing that tomato is a fruit, not a vegetable. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. And wisdom in the Bible is skill in the art of godly living, is one put it.

It's not just information, it's not just knowing what's going to happen. It's rather, it's skill in the art of godly living. It's knowing how the world is. Knowing this is God's world and who we are in it.

So it's not information, it's reorientation, if I can put it like that. Not information, but being reorientated to God's view on the world, to God's view of life.

I've lost track of how many Christian meetings I've been in where we've prayed that God would give us wisdom over a particular decision. I think often we'll be looking for information. Who should we appoint for this task? How should we go about this ministry?

Now it's not bad to pray that, we should pray the Lord's will be done, shouldn't we? But I don't think that's what James is really telling us to pray for here. He's telling us to pray for wisdom, to be reorientated.

[12 : 58] So our minds and our hearts are shaped to look at the world God's way. To live properly in the light of God's truth. That's why we read in the Old Testament, don't we?

What's the beginning of wisdom? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Psalm 111 verse 10. So as we're praying the Lord would give us wisdom, what we're looking for is the Lord to reorientate us.

So that we really fear Him more and more. And start to see the world as He sees it. See ourselves as He sees it. So we start to live properly in God's world. He would give us skill in the art of godly living.

And that begins with the fear of the Lord. Back in the 4th century, St. Augustine described wisdom as a reordering of our affections. Sin in our lives means we don't love the things we should love. We should love God first, but we don't. We love our job, we love our money, we love other things. Everything's out of kilter. So Augustine referred to wisdom as being the reordering of our affections. The reorientating of our lives around what is true and right and what is truly valuable.

[14:08] And that's why we need to pray for wisdom, isn't it? Because if we have wisdom from God, that is the resource we need to start valuing trials as they are.

And not as our culture sees trials. See naturally in our own selves, we want comfort, don't we? We want ease. We want life to be nice.

Add on to that the consumer culture we live in. Everything's sold in the prospect, the premise of it will make life happier, make life easier, make life nicer for you. The complete person in our culture is the person who has the latest phone, the latest car, or the great job, or the woman who has four perfectly behaved children and also a great career and keeps it all held down at once.

That's the complete person in our culture, isn't it? But that's not the complete person God is making. See, we need reorientation. We need to pray for God's wisdom. And you see the good news when we do pray about it?

What's the promise attached to this resource in verse 5? If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God he gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him. I don't know about you, but I get really hesitant in asking people to do things for me.

[15:23] We have neighbours who will sometimes babysit for us. I often don't really want to ask again, are we inconveniencing them? They don't have the same problem, they ask us to feed their cat on a regular basis, which we're doing right now. So hopefully we'll get another babysitting night out of here.

But sometimes we have that reticence, don't we? To ask people for things, because we think, oh, we don't want to bother them. Maybe we've asked too much, maybe we haven't done enough. Yet that is not the case with the Lord, is it?

He gives generously to all without reproach. He won't sit there and say, you haven't done enough for me, you've asked me too often. He won't. He will give wisdom to those who ask us.

He will reorientate us. He will reorder our affections. So we love what he loves, if we will ask. He gives without reproach. He will give generously.

So here is the great resource. So we can face trials. We've got the rationale, but here is the resource. Wisdom is God's gift to reorientate us. But there's a little caveat here, isn't there?

[16:25] Verse 6 and 7. There's a little caveat. Not everyone will receive this gift. Look at verse 6. But those who ask, 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. That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, for he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

What does it mean to be a double-minded person? What does that look like? Well, first of all, let me explain what it doesn't look like. James says here that the way we're to ask is with faith, believing.

Years ago, I was given a two-volume biography of Hudson Taylor, a 19th century pioneer missionary to China.

Now, I can remember virtually nothing of the details of that biography but this. There's one little phrase that kept cropping up again and again. When there was some financial catastrophe, when there was an uprising in the area, you would read that the missionaries met together for believing prayer.

That was a phrase, believing prayer. Now, that's not double-mindedness. That's people who are meeting together, believing, relying on the Lord to answer their prayers, to provide the money, to provide the safety, to provide the conversions of people leaving the Chinese religions and coming into faith.

[17:45] That was believing prayer. So, the double-minded man is the opposite of that. He's happy to pray but doesn't really believe. This is perhaps a superstitious thing. He knows he ought to pray so he goes through the motions of praying.

Or, he has a sort of view of God that isn't actually a biblical view. It's a deist view of God. The idea that there's a God there who kind of wound up the universe and let it running out now.

So, he kind of believes there's a God but doesn't believe this God interferes in daily life. He's a double-minded person, not expecting anything. Or, maybe he's double-minded in the sense that he's saying, Lord, I'd love wisdom to be able to count trials to your joy. But, as soon as he said that, actually, he's really longing for comfort again. He's really going out and doing whatever he can to make life comfortable and easy. And not cooperating with the trial. It's a bit like Augustine's famous prayer by believers in confession somewhere. Lord, make me chaste but not yet. I kind of want you what you want, God, but not totally. Well, that's a double-minded person. He doesn't necessarily really want the maturity and perfection God is working in his life.

[18:52] Rather, he or she still wants the comfort. As we go through this letter of James, we'll see he's writing to double-minded Christians. In chapter 4, verse 8, he mentions the double-minded specifically.

Those who have friendship with the world, which is enmity towards God, he puts it there. We see this double-mindedness in other places in the letter. People who are hearers of God's word but not doers. People who speak praises to God and yet curse their brothers and sisters.

People who love to be teachers because they love the sound of their own voice, but they're very slow to listen to others. People who talk about their faith but never demonstrate their faith in any actions. They're double-minded believers.

But as I've read through James, as I think about what he says here, I see this so often. I'm a double-minded believer as well. Aren't we all?

Don't we all? Don't we all suffer from spiritual schizophrenia sometimes? Where we think we long to be mature and yet actually we're quite happy living with a foot in this world.

[19:57] Thank you very much. See, James is like a careful doctor. As he looks at these believers he knows, he's pointing out the symptoms of double-mindedness. The division in their church, the judging one another, the half-hearted praying.

The symptom here is the lack of calm, isn't it? Verse 6. This person will pray but doesn't really believe and so therefore they're just tossed around like a wave of the sea. No calm, no peace, no maturity.

Now how often do I pray? They're not really necessarily believe the Lord will answer, not necessarily look for him or ask him, answering. How unlike the psalmist I am.

Psalms 130 verses 5 and 6. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. And in his word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman for the morning.

More than the watchman for the morning. Is that how we are when we're praying? When we're praying for the building? Praying for our friends? Praying for the event coming up on the 17th of November?

[21:04] See James puts his finger on some double-mindedness here. And through this letter not only does he point out the symptoms, he also gives the prognosis for double-mindedness. Here, he will not perceive anything from the Lord.

Ultimately he wants the judgment to come. But thankfully James also points us to the cure for double-mindedness. And the cure here, in verse 5, is to ask believing.

Believing that this great God who gives generously without finding fault will indeed give. While we've seen the rationale for counting trials of pure joy, we've seen the resources, the prayer of faith. Thirdly, we've come on more briefly to the real life example. So James is a great teacher, he knows this can sound abstract, so he gives us a real life example of trials and how it works out when we have wisdom in those trials.

We see those there in verses 9 and 10. Let the lowly brother boast in his exultation, and the rich in his humiliation. They're two separate trials that different believers can face, aren't they?

[22:12] The trial of lowliness, the trial of financial insecurity, the trial of having very little. The trial of being out of work and not knowing whether you're getting work before the next bill is due.

James says you have God-given wisdom, you can rejoice in that trial. Because you know God will one day lift you up from that. You know that in the world's eyes you are lowly and discarded and despised, yet God has chosen you.

You are, in a sense, exalted already, a part of his kingdom. And one day you'll be exalted and lifted up completely and receive the crown of righteousness, he talks about in verse 12. But there's another trial.

Actually a more difficult trial. Which he spends more time talking about. Verse 10, let the rich boast in his humiliation. Now however many people in our culture would think that wealth is a trial. And yet the Bible's clear, isn't it? Think of Jesus' own teaching. In Mark chapter 4, in the parable of the sower, you get the seed sown among thorns and Jesus says, Those people are the people who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful.

[23 : 27] Wealth is such trial, isn't it? It can easily make us unfruitful, it can easily hinder us rejoicing in trials and getting to the maturity and completeness that God wants for us.

See, wealth is a trial that can divert us from our first loyalty, can deceive us into self-importance and self-reliance. It is a trial. We need God's wisdom to overcome it.

So for the lowly, having God's wisdom means they can rejoice as those who know they're exalted by God. How does it work out for the wealthy? I'll read on, verse 11. 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. What's the picture? That flower in the field, that flower in the meadow.

It looks beautiful, doesn't it? But it's insignificant, isn't it? It's unimportant. And it's transient. It's going to be gone. So it is with wealth in this life. For the rich Christian who has wealth, great, but it's beautiful for a time, and it's not wrong in itself to have it.

[24 : 37] But James is saying to those wealthy businessmen in his congregation, remember it's all passing. It's all going. Rejoice in your humiliation. What is that humiliation?

That's the humiliation of being identified with the Son of God. Being identified with the one who died on a cross. The most despicable way of dying in the Roman Empire. Cicero wrote that a Roman citizen shouldn't even think for a moment about the cross.

Well that's the humiliation, isn't it? To be identified with the crucified king and with his people. To be identified with those who the world mock and scorn as being of no value.

In the church I served in for many years. We often had a homeless man called Fred, who you could smell before you could see him. He'd often been sitting a row in front or next to, or a row behind, a High Court judge.

A man who's quite often all in the newspapers. It's beautiful to see how that's what the cross had done. He brought people together from two different parts of society completely. United in Christ.

[25 : 46] James says that's the way we should view our polity and our riches. That's the real life example to help us to see how we should respond to trials. Well we've got the rationale, we've got the resources, we've got the real life example.

Finally, James doesn't leave it there. He comes to the reward that we have. The reward that enables us to count these trials as pure joy. 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. That's the reward that's coming. And how do we stand fast under trial, whether it's a trial of poverty or a trial of wealth?

A trial of sickness or a trial of unemployment? A trial of relational problems? A trial of loneliness? How do we really stand firm in that?

Is it through our anger and determination? Is it through some abstract kind of hope that one day everything will work out right? No, it's through God's wisdom, and even more than that, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 57] Because we can know, can't we, that trials will one day end in a crown of life. Why? Because we see how that worked out in Jesus' life, don't we? We see how it worked out in his life.

What could be worse suffering than for a perfectly innocent man, to be condemned to death for a crime he had not committed, to hang on a cross, not just enduring the pain of the cross, but enduring the wrath of his Father at the same time for us.

See, God continues that trial to work incredible good. So can't he do that in trials in our own lives? Where is Jesus now, seated at God's right hand, ruling over everything, guaranteeing the crown of life for those who trust in him and follow him?

If God can use even Jesus' suffering for eternal good for so many, then he is certainly powerful enough to use the suffering we experience for our good. And in Jesus we have a high priest who understands us.

Hebrews 2 verse 10 tells us that Jesus was made perfect through suffering, perfectly qualified to be our Saviour through his suffering. And as our high priest, he is able to help those who are being suffered.

[28 : 16] We read in Hebrews 2. And he endured that suffering, Hebrews 12, because he was, he endured the cross, despising the shame, for the joy that was set before him.

And so he can help us to do that too. Whatever suffering we're going through, whatever trials, whatever difficulties, the Lord Jesus is on our side. He has died for us, he prays for us, and 1 Peter 5 verse 4, where he appears, those who will receive an unfading crown of glory from him.

I don't know what trials you're suffering at the moment. Do you see how you can count them pure joy? Because Jesus is working good for us in them.

He will make us perfect and complete through them. If we ask for wisdom, the Lord God will give it, that we can see things as he sees them. And in Jesus we have a high priest who prays for us. I'm sure many of you know Johnny Oaks and Tada, very into horses and riding and outdoor activities, dives into a lake, age 17, broke her back so badly, she's in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the neck downwards.

She went through suicidal periods. She had many people to tell her to pray for healing. But through it all, she knew the Lord was at work. She was able to write, I sit here in my wheelchair, glad that I have not been healed on the outside, but glad that I have been healed on the inside, healed from my own self-centered wants and wishes.

[29 : 55] God has used that suffering in her life to make her complete. He can do that in my life and your life as well. He gives us that reward. We can remember the resources that he gives us.

So let's pray for one another to count our trials as pure joy. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, thank you that you are a loving Father, that you are good, that you do not destroy us with the things you send into our lives.

lives. Father, you know the trials that each one here is facing and going through and enduring. You know the difficulties.

So Father, I know this is not an easy message. And yet I know, we know, you're a good and loving God. So we pray you'll give us the wisdom we need. Give us wisdom to see this world as you see it. Reorder our affections, reorientate us to live as we should in your world. May we know the help of our great high priest who is there interceding for us.

[31 : 13] Grant us grace that you may work your purposes in our lives. That we may be perfect, lacking nothing. We ask this so that glory may go to you.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.