

3. Trials are Required

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

(James 1:2-4)

The Direct Approach

As we begin to look more closely at the body of the letter, we notice that James takes what may be called the direct approach. There is no beating around the bush, but a word straight from the heart to the heart. This approach is not limited to the first verses of the letter of James, but in a sense characterizes the whole letter. James says it as it is.

This does not mean that James has no regard for the situation and sensitivities of his readers. There are people who always speak their mind without thinking, and they are not interested in whether their words are hurtful or not. Strong language does not always exhibit wisdom or impart true strength.

James speaks frankly and directly, and sometimes his admonitions are razor-sharp, but there remains deep love and genuine concern for his readers. Very often, he introduces major elements -as in this text- with the expression “my brothers” or “my dear brothers”. The NIV notes that James does so fifteen times in his very short letter. It is important for us to know this. To James, the readers are brothers in Christ in a very deeply spiritual manner. He does not stand above them as the brother of the Lord Jesus, but beside them as a fellow brother in Christ. He knows that he cannot effectively admonish or encourage others except within the framework of fellowship in Christ, as a brother among brothers.

The next thing that strikes us in this passage is that James writes about something that is basically impossible to do, and therefore appears to be nonsense: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...” (1:2). Who in his right mind would really consider trials as pure joy?

If James had written, “Consider it *necessary*,” we could perhaps understand it, but how can we consider trials pure joy?

This already indicates that we are going to learn some lessons that do not come easy in life, and that need to be spelled out in no uncertain terms. James will not sweet-talk us about salvation, but he will show forth the structures of the kingdom of heaven and in the process take away many misunderstandings about what it means to follow Christ.

The first lesson that the Lord Jesus teaches us through James’ writing is that trials are required for the maturity of faith. We will consider how to look at trials, how to work with trials, and how to grow through trials.

Facing Trials

Let us again look at James’ remarkable words: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” As an aside, we note that James is not the only one who writes about the relationship between joy and trials. Luke writes about it in Acts, and Peter addresses it in his first letter also.

We must first determine what is meant here by the word “trials”. The King James Version translates the same word as “temptations”. These two words go back to the same root word in the original, yet we have learned to distinguish between them. James also makes this distinction in 1:13-15, which we will look at more closely later.

Let us establish for now that the word “trials” in this verse denotes difficult situations which come our way and make our life very difficult. In these situations, our deepest certainties and loftiest principles are often challenged. It is important to note that we do not usually cause trials; rather, they come upon us.

James writes about *facing* certain trials. Literally, he writes, “When you fall into certain trials...” There are many adverse things that come upon us or surround us, and we can fall upon difficult times. So James is not talking here (yet) about sins or sinful situations -although sin is never out of the picture altogether in this life- but he is talking about the circumstances of life which can sometimes be very pressing and almost unbearable.

We should realize that trials do not just happen without rhyme or reason, but come from somewhere and from someone. Trials come from the LORD God. He is the one who tries us, testing us through events and situations, and he does so with a purpose. While other people can be involved in our trials and even Satan can use them for his purpose of temptation, the trials of life come

from God's hand, as we confess concerning the providence of God, for example, in Lord's Day 10 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

What are these trials? In the original context of James' letter, these trials are the adversities caused by the persecution of the Christian church. This was being experienced especially by the Jewish Christians who were facing a twofold problem: as Jews, they were barely tolerated by the Gentiles and as Christians, they were shunned as deserters by their own race and relatives.

Trials of Many Kinds

But what does it mean for us today that we must face trials? James writes about trials *of many kinds*. Trials are both many and varied, and life in general is not always easy. Sometimes it is downright difficult. There are the sorrows over lost things, opportunities, or persons. We sometimes have to give up so much. Then there are the disappointments over people who have cheated us, not helped us, deserted us, or circumstances that just deteriorated constantly. There are the sacrifices we have had to make, some with success and some with no result.

In life, we come to face our very deepest limitations, physically, mentally, and even spiritually. Think of the third lament in the book of Lamentations: "I am the man who has seen affliction" (Lam 3:1). It seems there is trial after trial, without end.

How do we face all this? What do we do with it? Some long for death. Some just become harder and more cynical as they go along. They blame it on others, even on God. Was not life with Christ supposed to be one of happiness and joy? Would we not be carried on wings of love and lifted up where we belong, to where eagles soar?

Instead, we are grounded and we cannot get loose. And just when we think that maybe we are finally getting somewhere, another setback occurs and we lose territory rather than gain it. Would we rather not say then, "Consider it pure *misery* when you meet with various trials?" Yet James writes that we must consider it pure joy. We must not misunderstand him, as if he says that we should *enjoy* misery. We are not told to enjoy trials. Nobody has to say, "I'm so happy, I have the bubonic plague!" or, "Wonderful, I went bankrupt yesterday!" To consider something pure joy does not necessarily mean that we enjoy it, but that we receive and endure it positively because it is a means of the Lord to test and strengthen our faith.

How then do we face trials? That is the first issue. We can say that we do not want them. We can refuse to accept them. We can deal with them in a lack

of faith, and we can even curse God. Things come into our lives which affect us deeply, and these things just happen. We cannot prevent them, stop them, or change them. Yet we know that all things, both blessings and trials, come from God's hand. Remember what Job said to his wife, when she told him to curse God and die: "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10).

Working With Trials

James tells us that we must consider it pure joy when we face various trials, because we know that all things must work for our good. In this case, pure joy is not tremendous excitement but a joy in the Lord Jesus Christ. It means rejoicing in the Lord. It means that we look at a trial not as something that is meant to distress us, but that is given to impress upon us God's love and power. We consider our trials carefully, weigh them, and ponder them so that we can say, "In all this I see the Lord working in my life, being busy with me, shaping and forming me. He surely gives me much to deal with so that I may become efficient by his grace to face life's many trials."

If we do not learn to regard a trial as a positive thing, then we cannot work with it. For that is what we must do. When trials come, we must not give up on life in bitter resignation, but we must work with them. The proper perspective on trials leads to a positive action with them.

Again we must read the passage carefully. James does not say that trials themselves develop perseverance. Sometimes we read it in that way. We may think that the more trials we go through, the more we learn to endure. In a sense that is true, or can be for a while, but if the pressure is relentless and becomes too great, even the strongest person can break.

Instead, James introduces another vital element in 1:3: "...because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." Trials are a testing of faith. We are not tested as human beings, whether we measure up to human standards, but we are tested as covenant children, whether we walk by faith.

The expression "the testing of your faith" is very important. When a test is conducted, the tester has a certain purpose in mind. The Lord says, "I want you to work with your trials in the faith that I give you. Regard trials in faith and deal with them in faith, for then you will see my great purpose in all this: that the testing of faith develops perseverance."

The word used here for "testing" is employed more often in the Bible, and always in the sense of testing to measure progress and to bring about

endurance. We may therefore not protest that the Lord knows us, what we can and cannot do, and so should not *have* to test us.

Consider, for example, how mother eagles push their babies out of the nest high on a cliff. In this way, the eaglets learn to spread their tiny wings and fly. The mother only intends to test them, that is, to train them. Testing is not meant to determine whether we measure up, but it is a process whereby we learn to exercise our faith. When our faith is exercised daily and put to the test on a constant basis, it stays alive and becomes strong.

One commentary draws a comparison to the testing of a boxer. When a well-trained boxer, who has been tested often in the ring, is set up against an untested opponent, the wily veteran is bound to win. This holds true in all areas of life: we become efficient and strong in whatever task we must do because we have been well-tested.

The Confirming of Our Faith

The testing of faith leads to the confirming of faith. Our faith becomes stronger, and instead of giving up, we see something developing out of it and through it, namely perseverance. Note carefully that perseverance is not the result of all the trials, but of the testing of faith. It is the testing that leads to perseverance.

What is perseverance? It is not a passive resignation, like being patient and quietly undergoing all adversity. We do not say, “We must bear this trial, but we certainly do not see the reason for it.” James says that testing of faith *develops* perseverance. We have to work with our trials so that perseverance results. And perseverance is that we learn to lift our burdens and carry them with us through life. We are taught how to work with trials, to lift them up by faith and carry them onward. It is not easy, but it is necessary.

The word “perseverance” also adds the element of time. When a trial lasts only a little while and is not too heavy, we can persevere. We may even be amazed at our ability to bear up under adversity. But what if the trial is lasting? If the effects of a certain trial are of such a magnitude that our whole life is altered by it, how then do we put our shoulders under it and carry it with us through life? Is our perseverance then a result of faith tested?

Indeed, the greatest trials are those that change our life here on earth for always, such as the loss of loved ones, health, home, or possessions. They include having to live with a handicap that persists, dealing with the onslaught of time and the breakdown of body and mind, facing our shortcomings and the

shortcomings of others close to us, and seeing those we love become unbelieving. Then we need perseverance.

In order to work with all these situations, and more, we need to have a well-tested faith. We need a faith that can grapple with the issues and that knows where to find the answers to our questions. We need a faith that is rooted in Christ and in the Scriptures, and that constantly digs deeper into the riches of God's grace. We need a faith that does not cause us to question where God is, but makes us rejoice in the knowledge that the Lord is always with us.

Growing Through Trials

Now we must ask what the reason is for all this. The text says that perseverance must finish its work so that “[we] may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” We need to become mature and complete. We know that to reach maturity, we must *grow*. We have to grow physically in order to become adults, but we also have to grow mentally and especially spiritually. I believe that the word “mature” here refers first of all to the power and process of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is growth by the Spirit into Christ, into God, and becoming of one mind with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word “mature” is translated in various ways. Sometimes the translation “perfect” is used: “so that you may be perfect.” This does not mean that we will be without sin, for that is something we can never attain in this world. But the word “mature” or “perfect” also means the fulfillment of purpose. Someone who is mature has grown in every way, can handle life, and may be entrusted with important tasks. He is someone who has developed a proper perspective on life and has achieved a balance.

“Mature” is also used to describe the sacrificial lamb at the Passover. It had to be a lamb that was perfect, without defect. It had to be the best that could be given, one that reflected the way God created lambs to be. Here we are reminded of our Lord Jesus Christ who is also called a lamb without blemish. He was mature and perfect, and so he could offer himself to God.

Being mature means being full-grown, strong, and wise, beyond the stage of spiritual weakness, tested and confirmed in faith, with all of the bad elements purged. Think of what we sing in Psalm 66:4 of the *Book of Praise*: “Thy people Thou, O God, hast tested as ore is in the furnace tried; we in the fire of thy refining have been, like silver, purified.” In order to obtain the finest and purest precious metal, the ore must be placed in the oven time and again until all the unwanted elements have disappeared. That is quite a process. In Psalm 12:4 of the *Book of Praise*, we sing about the purest silver

being seven times refined, seven being the number of completion. God says, “Let me just run you through the oven of my refining once again.”

This refining is not easy for us. It is a process that James himself had to undergo. Even more, the Lord Jesus had to be refined as well, despite being sinless, and his strength had to appear in weakness. Christ had to be made perfect through suffering (Heb 2:10). All of the Lord’s suffering, even the agony of hell, was endured in order to bring out his maturity and perfection in every way. As our Savior, he is not the great exception but the great example, the great helper, and the merciful and faithful high priest. He knows trials. He knows the power of faith. He knows how to persevere. He knows how to become perfect and mature.

Training in Maturity

Life is a training lesson in maturity. Given time and opportunity, we must come to a certain point where we are spiritually mature. This does not mean that we are then without sin, but that we have reached our goal of readiness to meet the Lord. Are we ready?

There is also another word that James uses in 1:4, and that is “complete”. This is an interesting word that ties in with the word “mature”. When we are mature, we are complete and we do not lack anything. The word is interesting because it is sometimes used to describe someone who has won a lottery. Such a person is taken care of, as it were, for the rest of his days. He lacks nothing. The word “complete”, like “mature”, means that nothing is missing, that there is no defect, and that one is ready to meet God.

We must grow through trials by persevering in faith and by holding on to God’s covenant promises. Then we will come to the point where we are mature and complete, not lacking in anything. We can say thankfully and humbly along with Paul, “I have fought the good fight.”

Life is not easy. Sometimes it is downright hard. There is so much brokenness. There are so many trials. We do not learn easily. Time and again the Lord must say, “Back into the refining oven with you.” But let us hold fast to this: our Lord Jesus Christ went before us, and through all his trials, which we cannot begin to fathom, he was faithful. He conquered all and showed that he was mature and complete. Christ even appeared to James, who, upon his prompting, wrote these words: be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

That is the goal of life. That is how we must look at trials, work with trials, and grow through trials. We must not be childish and constantly complain; rather, we must be mature and confess the Lord’s goodness. We must not focus

on what we do not have or do not have anymore. We can leave a lot behind in life and still be complete, lacking in nothing, for all that we have is in Christ.