

The Crucible

James Series

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Bible Text: James 1:2-4

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We will read the first 11 verses of James chapter one.

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.¹

Thus far the God's holy Word.

You may be seated.

Do you children know what a crucible is? A crucible is a special furnace that is designed for the purification of metals. You think about gold. In biblical times it was a special clay furnace that would in the intense heat of fire separate the impurities and cause the gold to collect in the bottom, like exactly how a crucible works today. It is actually the bottom part of the furnace where the gold is burned under very high heat to burn out its impurities. As it melts, the good gold falls into the crucible at the bottom of the furnace.

¹ James 1:1-11.

Now the Bible often refers to God's work in our lives as a furnace, a fire. We may think about this concept of a crucible, that the trials God sends to us are the furnace in which he places us for the purpose of refining our lives, removing the dross, the sin and the impurities that we might all the more shine and be precious for his glory and his honor.

Well, the figure of the crucible is apparently what James has in mind as he begins, now, his discussion of his two main points in the book of James, first dealing with trials and then going on to deal with the Proverbs, the exhortations for Christian living.

Last week we noted that this is a book of apostolic authority inspired by the Holy Spirit, written for the encouragement particularly of Jewish Christians who by the early dispersion and the later persecutions in Jerusalem had been scattered throughout the world. James is writing for their comfort, encouragement and for their growth in grace and in faith.

In verse two he begins now his discussion of trials, a discussion that, of course, is not academic to you and me, is it? It is a discussion with which we are personally well aware.

As I was thinking about our community and thinking of the various trials, some ongoing trials of illnesses, those that have terminal illnesses, those that have financial difficulties, those who have family relationship problems and many other things, some that we know about, probably many other that maybe only a few close friends and family members are aware.

But we are in this crucible. What James is writing is written for us today for our comfort, encouragement and endurance.

He begins with this very strange commandment in verse two. And he will develop this matter of trials, how we seek God's wisdom to deal with them. He distinguishes for us between the temptations that come from God through trials, the temptations that come from Satan to sin. He teaches us to humble ourselves under the Word of God in the midst of its teaching and our difficulties.

This morning we are going to look at verses two through four where the Holy Spirit is teaching us that we are to rejoice in our trials because God has designed them to work unto our sanctification. We are to rejoice in our trials because God has designed them to work unto our sanctification.

We are going to consider three things. We are going to consider the curious commandment, the clear basis and the certain hope of benefit. In verse two we see this very curious commandment.

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.”²

² James 1:2.

Notice the address of the commandment. Throughout this very small letter, directly and indirectly, James addresses the believers to whom he writes as brethren, the plural that encompasses brothers and sisters.

It is interesting, isn't it, the man that was unwilling to refer to himself as the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ—recognizing that it is all who believe in him and do his will that are his brothers—identifies with his fellow Christians as a kinsman, as a brother.

And, as I mentioned last week, James does not overtly talk much about the role of Christ as we experience these things as we seek to obey, but his constant use of this title of brethren is the reminder that he is writing to us in terms of who and what we are in Christ Jesus.

You can think of it as a shorthand. So when he says, “Brethren,” he is reminding us that he is talking to us as those who not only have been redeemed by Christ, but are in the family of God, are in union with Christ, thus, in union communion with one another. So it is a term of great affection. It is a term of gospel hope.

He talks about the circumstances, then, of the brethren. He says, “You will encounter various trials or temptations.”

The word “temptation” as many of you is, in a sense, a neutral word. It is the word that is used for the trials and afflictions that God sends. It is the word that is used of the enticement of Satan and the devils, the demons for us to sin. The word receives its moral meaning from the context. James will define that a few verses later that in these trials in the temptations into which we will fall, God is not tempting us to sin. But, rather, God is putting us into the trial in order to test us.

Now we have learned from the book of Job that even as God in his sovereignty puts us into the trial to test us, Satan can be working concurrently to tempt us to a sinful response. So it is always going to be this tension when we are in our trials and afflictions, God's purposes and Satan's purposes. But God's purposes are never evil. God cannot be tempted to sin and God does not tempt to sin.

But the reality of our lives is we are going to face multitudes of temptations, various, multi colored trials. And by the turn, then, James is thinking about the various afflictions and trials of our lives.

Of course, persecution, much more real in his day than it is for us in our own day, but we have brothers and sisters around the world who are in the intense furnace of persecution, physical afflictions, long term illnesses or short illnesses, terminal illnesses, weaknesses of the flesh, personal problems and relationships, financial difficulties. Our lives are encompassed with a multitude of these various trials.

And notice how he describes that they come upon us. The New American Standard translation “encounter” is way too weak. The Greek word here means to fall into. It is the same word that is used by Jesus in the parable of the good Samaritan when he says in Luke 10 that the man fell amongst or into the thieves or the robbers. He didn’t just encounter these guys on the road. They sprang with surprise upon him. They encompassed him. They captured him. And this is the force of this word that we are going to fall into, by God’s design, various trials, afflictions, testings, yes, temptations as Satan will be at work through these things himself by God’s sovereign purpose and allowance to tempt us unto sin.

So when the brethren, when you and I fall into the various trials of our lives, what, then, is this curious commandment?

“Count it all joy.”³

That is curious, isn’t it?

Now, when he says that he is not saying that we don’t feel the pain of the temptation or the trial or the affliction. Remember in Hebrews chapter 12 the Holy Spirit teaches us that no trial for the moment is joyful. The trial itself is not a joyous occasion and, thus, the Bible does not forbid us to mourn, to grieve, to weep, to pray for and seek relief.

But neither is he talking about the stoical gritting our teeth and pressing on through this trial regardless of what happens.

So, “Count it all joy.”⁴ We could say, “Count it your chief joy that you have fallen into these trials.” In other words, you must recognize the loving and good hand of God in what is happening and to count it joy means you submit and not simply with a resignation, but with a quiet and peaceful submission of yourself to the purposes of God knowing that he is going to cause this to work with everything else in your life together for your good, the good of his people and for his own glory.

So the joy is not in the suffering. The joy is in what God is doing in and through the suffering and, thus, we are to consider it, to reckon it as our chief joy.

You remember the attitude of the apostles after they had been flogged by the Sanhedrin. They run away rejoicing that they had suffered for Christ’s sake. And the Savior himself teaches us in Matthew chapter five that, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted.” Rejoice in those things, not in the pain, not ignoring the sorrows and the hurts, but looking through the rain of the affliction to the rainbow of God’s goodness.

Now, this command, indeed, is curious. And when you think about it—and I am afraid this image is going to lose its force in our new society and I... even when I use it, I cringe. This commandment, for many of us, is like rubbing fingernails across a chalkboard. You

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

know that feeling and you know that sound. And that is how this affects us, isn't it? This goes against the very grain of our nature.

And so he quickly adds to the curious command in verse three the clear basis for the commandment. He says, "You can count it all joy knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance."

Why can we count it joy when we encounter or fall into these various trials and temptations? Because we know two things, that the trials sent by God will prove our faith and they will improve our faith. They will, first, will prove our faith. And so the word he uses here for testing is different from the word in verse two.

"Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance."⁵

This is the word... its negative is reprobation. This is the word in the positive that means to test, to search in order to prove the genuineness and the reality of it. Even as gold is smelted, it is assayed. It is tested as to its genuineness and to its level of purity. And James is telling us that we may consider joy in our trials because God is proving the reality of our faith to ourselves. Yeah, it is not to him, you see. God knows exactly what our hearts are. When the Bible says God tests us, as he did Abraham, it wasn't—even though God will use the language "that I might know what is in your heart,"—it was really that Abraham might know what was in his heart.

In Deuteronomy eight he speaks of how he tried, he proved the children of Israel in the wilderness those 40 years. Notice, for us, in the first place, it tests the sincerity of our faith. This is what the Savior is teaching, for example, in the parable of the soils, particularly the seed that falls on the rocky ground, the soil with a little thin layer of top soil across a level of rock and so the seed germinates as if it is in an incubator and it springs up very quickly. And then as the sun beats down on it—which is good for seed—it forces it to seek its roots down into the moist rich soil underneath. Well, the roots hit the rock and it withers.

And our Savior tells us that that sun is the trials, the persecutions, the afflictions of our lives that God sends us to demonstrate to us the genuineness of our faith. Just as hot sun on a healthy plant in good soil causes it to grow and bear fruit, the trials of God beat down upon the genuine child of God that his roots might sink all the more deeply into Christ Jesus and bear fruit.

So the testing is for yourself, to know the state of your faith.

How would you know that you were a genuine believer if God did not try you?

A second thing for your self, it shows you the liveliness of your faith. The Puritans would talk about that from the bottom of a well on a bright sunny day you can see the stars. I have never been down in one so I don't really care to test that. I will take their

⁵ Ibid.

word for it. But you get the analogy. You are in the pit. But it is in the pit that you are able to see the beauty of what is above. And it is in the pits of our lives that we begin to see the lively faith acting on Christ and resting in him.

The trials also teach us the shallowness and weakness of our faith. We are constantly reminded how little we believe and how quick we are to murmur our complaint, how easily tempted we are to fall away and not to persevere. And so we count our trials a joy because they test us. They prove us, the great core of our being.

But they also demonstrate something to others. God uses the trials of his children to be an encouragement and a comfort and an exhortation to their fellow believers. There is a great chemistry that takes place when in the body of Christ one is suffering and God gives that one grace to bear through that and faith shines and the rest of us are comforted and encouraged.

My wife and I went to visit Millie VanVoris when we got back in town after we had learned that she had been diagnosed to have only a few months to live. And when we left I said, "You know, it is a great blessing to visit the godly who are about to die." We were encouraged. We were helped as you are and you know these situations and circumstances, how when you are with the brother or sister and you see what God is doing in their life in the crucible, that your own faith is strengthened and helped so greatly.

But it is also a testimony to those who are outside, those who do not know Christ because they gape with wonder. They know they couldn't respond in this way. They can find no joy in the miseries of their life. And they begin to wonder what makes you tick. How in the world can you endure with joy through that? And God will use that to bring some to Christ. He will also use it, I think Paul implies in Philippians, to make the judgment greater of those that persecute the Church, the very contented, peaceful, joyful resignation of believers.

And there are many records in history of persecutors who come to Christ because of the demeanor and manner of the one who died under their hand. Truly that was part of the pricks against which Paul kicked, the conviction. He couldn't get out of his mind the death of Stephen, the peace and joy, the assurance, the confidence. And so it proves our own faith.

But we also see in verse three that it improves our faith. We get back now to the image of the crucible. The furnace of affliction is burning us to produce endurance.

Some Bibles translate this "patience" and that is just too pale a term. This word "endurance" is the word of persevere, of boldly pressing on regardless of the circumstances. It might be struggling to put one foot in front of the other and continue down that path, but you do continue.

The Bible teaches us that we enter heaven only through endurance. Now, we know that endurance is by God's grace. We know that our legal to heaven is in our standing in Christ Jesus, but it is God who has revealed to us that the entrance is through our endurance. And that is why our fathers refer to the preservation of the saint as the perseverance of the saints.

You see, it is the trial that improves us because God is making us walk, working in us to put one foot in front of the other and to continue on and to press on regardless of the pain, the obstacles, the difficulties that we might learn to persevere.

Surely this is, in part, what God has in mind when Jeremiah is lamenting in Jeremiah chapter 12 when he learns of his own brethren in Anathoth are conspiring to kill him and that God responds to him with this answer that if you can't run with the footmen, verse five.

“If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, Then how can you compete with horses? If you fall down in a land of peace, How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?”⁶

If you can't race with your fellow men, how are you going to race with the horses? You see, God is training us through this constant exercise of trial to improve our faith. If we can't walk in the pastures of life, well, in Jeremiah's day the thickets of Jordan were brambles and bushes and they were wild [?]. How are you going to do it there if you can't walk across a meadow full of sweet wildflowers?

And, you see, it is only as we are trained at the lower stages that faith is strengthened for the greater tasks that are to come. And so the trials, the testings of the crucible of God that refine us and that enable us to go from strength to strength, grace to grace, glory to glory.

What then is the certain result of all of this? Having seen the curious commandment and the clear reason for it, to prove and improve our faith, then what is the result?

Well, the certain benefit is spelled out in verse four.

“And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁷

Now notice. We must continue to endure. There is a work that is taking place through our endurance. The translation “perfect result” is better translated “let endurance have its perfect work.” In other words, God has designed in the circumstances of the lives of each one of us a work, a work that he is doing and it is a perfect work because he is doing it. And if we move through life with fits and starts, if we start off with great exuberance and

⁶ Jeremiah 12:5.

⁷ James 1:4.

we count it all joy and that lasts for the first bit of the test and then we begin to lag, we are going to miss out on the perfect work.

There is great comfort in this concept of a perfect work. You see, God doesn't have any ready made trials. They don't come off the rack at JC Penney's. God's trials are designer, designed by him, fitted to each one of us particularl. And that is the perfect work that he is doing in us. And the result of that work is described in three terms.

“And let endurance have its perfect result [its perfect work], so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁸

Two positives and a negative. The truth is, what God is doing is making us perfect. Now the Bible tells us to be perfect as God is perfect. The perfection that is pictured for us in Christ Jesus is the goal to which we press on in this life. But we are not going to attain it. The perfect work of perfection is the maturity of our Christian experience. And the New Testament primarily uses this Word for maturity so that it is a growing, proportionate conformity to the image of Christ. It has with it, then, a soundness. This perfect work is a whole work. It is complete. That is expressed negatively, then, that it lacks in nothing, that the work that God is doing in us is not simply in one part of our lives, but he is working in us to perfect us, to mature us in a balanced way. So there is a wholeness to our character.

You see, we all are imbalanced and we have our areas of spiritual strength as we have our areas of personal and mental strength. And we have our weaknesses. And God is not simply content to leave us with our strengths. But God is doing this work in us to cause us to mature in Christ, to become sound minded, trained believers, able to discern between good and evil, making wise decisions, growing in conformity to the image of Christ in our thoughts, our words, our deeds and our whole manner. So it is not an imbalance in our sanctification which there often is. We are zealous for truth, but then that zeal can be expressed with a harshness or a bitter spirit. Or we are very empathetic and full of compassion and then we bend and compromise with sin and with error.

No, the perfect work that God is doing is to make us mature in Christ in a whole way so that there are not these gaps in our lives, but we are lacking nothing as God is doing his grace in us.

And, I don't know about you, but I often pray that the Lord would make me whole, balanced in my sanctification. And it is through the trials that he has promised that he is going to accomplish that work.

Now you see how it all fits together. And the command really isn't so curious any longer, is it, to count it all joy when you fall into these various trials and temptations, because God has sent them in order to do his work in your life.

⁸ Ibid.

So the curious command has a clear foundation in the purposes of God, a clear promise the result of what God, a certain promise result in what God is going to do for us.

So how do you respond when you fall into various trials? Do you have a Garfield attack? Do you lose your stripes? You have a stress attack and lose all sense of balance?

You know, we often use the idiom, "I am under stress."

No, we are not under stress. We are in a crucible and stress is the wrong way we respond to it. We need to change our thinking and our vocabulary here. Stress is simply our sinful response to trials.

Do you murmur and complain? Do you grow embittered because of the constancy of it?

You see, it is not going to let up.

One of the things that often happens to people who drown in the ocean is that just as you come up for breath, the next wave knocks you back down. And sometimes you feel that way in life, don't you? You get up and you are gasping. And as you are gasping for breath, the next trial pushes you down. You struggle back up.

But the difference is God won't let you drown in his trials. He might let you drown in the ocean and take you on to heaven. But he won't let you drown in your trials. It only feels like it.

But we must not respond then sinfully. We must not worry to which Paul teaches us in Philippians is also a sin.

Well, then, what do we do? Well, Manton says, for example, in the first place, we must not think like the world, because the world will tell us as Job's wife said to him, "God doesn't love you. Curse God and die." That is what Satan wanted, do you see? How could God care for you and these things be happening to you?

Oh, the world would tell us, "You know, you really deserve better than this." Or the world will tell you, you know, this is really a rotten mess and your God must really be an ogre.

Or the world might say, "You just got to grit your teeth and go on."

We must not think as the world things. Rather, we must think that our mind is trained by Scripture. As Paul would say, "Our mind is not being conformed to the world. It is being transformed by the Spirit of Christ who is in us working in us so that we learn, then, to think about the trials of life and the way that God's Word teaches us to think."

And what are some of those things? Well, we begin with the fact that God who is sovereign is the one who caused us to fall into these various trials and afflictions and he

does so with a perfect love for us, a love so rich and great he didn't withhold his own Son from us in order to make us his children, so that he who gave us Christ Jesus will in him also freely give us all things. It is God's love.

We think about God's aim and intention. See, God has a purpose. There is nothing purposeless. I don't care how minor the irritant or how severe the affliction, there is nothing purposeless in God's work in your life. And so we must think about God's aim and intention, which leads us, then, to seek to improve the affliction by praying not just for deliverance—which we may do—but before we do that we should pray, “Lord, teach me the lessons you have designed for me,” that we might know his intent, we might take hold of it, that we might see his spirit working it out in our lives.

Thinking biblically it leads us to understand that every trial comes according to God's time plan. It didn't fit my calendar, but it fits his calendar perfectly.

Think as the Bible teaches us to think causes us to realize that God is all wise and he doesn't make mistakes and he hasn't missed out on something. He hasn't forgotten that I just finished going through this other trial. No, he is wise. He is powerful.

And so as we go into these trials we think on God and then we cling to Christ Jesus. We cling to Christ Jesus.

You look to him. In the first place you recognize that you have responded wrongly. You have sinned. Just don't gloss over it. There is great freedom in saying, “I have sinned.”

And why is there great freedom? Because then there is an answer. There is forgiveness. You blame your personality and your circumstances and you become a victim, there is no hope. But those words are so liberating. “I have sinned.” Because I then confess my sin and know because of my Savior that I am forgiven.

So we cling to Christ for the pardon of all of our wrong responses to our trials. We also cling to Christ for the grace that he has purchased for us to undergo the trials.

Everything that you and I need for every breath of life is completely ours in Christ Jesus. And we cling to him by faith and we look to him that he will give us the grace to keep this curious commandment.

“Count it all joy, brethren, when you fall into various trials.”

Now, I have to ask you, then. Do you know this Savior in the way I have spoken? Perhaps you don't and perhaps the very trials and things God is using in your life are to draw you unto him, to show you your absolute bankruptcy in yourself, your worthlessness, your helplessness. He will bring you there before he will save you.

But if life is bringing you to this point, that you are nothing and you have nothing, he sets before you Christ Jesus.

Believe in him. To believe in him is to have life and life eternal. And then it is to be able to count, to reckon it joy when you fall into these various temptations. Amen.

Our God in heaven, we bless your name as you so wonderfully teach us from your Word about your work in our lives. We saw in the case of Job, but now we see it practically in New Testament revelation how you want us to respond and we thank you and we pray that your Spirit will weave these truths deeply into the fabric of our lives. Give us grace to grow, then, and to count it all joy as we fall into various trials and testings of our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.