

*Joy in Trials: James 1:2-4*  
 Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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In verse 1 of this letter, James, the brother of Jesus, identifies himself as a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then he addresses his letter to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. He greets them with the word *chairein*, and then immediately begins to write of joy (*charan*) in trials. This morning I want to look at this passage one verse at a time. I want to talk about “Joy in Trials” in verse 2, “The Testing of Your Faith” in verse 3, and then “Steadfastness” in verse 4. Verse 2 gives us a command. Verse 3 gives us a basis (a ground) for that command. And then verse 4 contains another command, and the purpose for it.

### **Joy In Trials**

First of all, let’s look at verse 3: “Joy in Trials.” This would have been a very relevant topic for the people who first read this letter. They were under persecution because of their faith, and therefore they were certainly experiencing trials of various kinds. This instruction is also very relevant to us, because we are all experiencing trials of various kinds. Maybe there are health problems that you are dealing with, or financial hardships. Maybe you are experiencing trials at work, or maybe your trials are at home. You may have lost a loved one, which can be a very severe trial. In various ways we all meet trials in life.

Notice that the verse does not say, “*if* you meet trials of various kinds.” It says, “*when* you meet trials of various kinds.” We wish it said *if*, because then we could think that maybe I’ll be someone who is able to avoid these trials. But it doesn’t say *if*. It says *when*. Trials are a guarantee. Death, taxes, and trials. You can count on these things! So the question we need to ask ourselves is not: “How can I avoid trials in my life?” The question we need to consider is: “How should I respond to the trials that I will most certainly meet in life?”

The command in this verse is a bit shocking. James writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” Is that a shocking statement to you? It probably is, because it sounds masochistic. It sounds like some twisted delight in pain and hardship. What does this mean, to count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds?

Douglas Moo, in his commentary on James, makes a helpful observation that the word “all” in this verse suggests intensity rather than exclusivity. In other words, the verse is saying: “think of these various trials with wholehearted joy.” It is not necessarily saying that we must experience nothing but joy when we meet these trials. There should be a deep, intense joy in the midst of trials, but our response may not be (probably won’t be) exclusively joyful. There will be a wide range of emotions, and many of those emotions will be entirely appropriate and healthy. But underneath them all, there should be a deep-seated joy and contentment and peace.

This, of course, is completely contrary to our sinful nature. How are we tempted to respond to trials? How does our sinful nature incline us to respond to trials? We might gripe and complain and take out our frustrations on other people. We might plot revenge against someone who wronged us and caused the trial. A very seductive temptation would be to convince ourselves and others that we’re strong enough to endure

these trials on our own. I don't need God. I don't need help. I'm strong enough and smart enough to get through this myself. That kind of response may seem commendable, but it is extremely prideful. The thought that we can endure trials in our own strength. If we think that, then we think way too highly of ourselves.

Another response that is just as prideful, although it manifests itself very differently, is self-pity. This would be another sinful way to respond to trials, and it's another way of thinking too highly of ourselves. We think, "I'm too good for this. I don't deserve this. This trial should be happening to someone else, but not to me."

This command given to us in Scripture—that we must consider it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds—this command is contrary to our sinful nature. And therefore we need to recognize that we desperately need God's grace to heed this command. To have joy in the midst of a trial is an utterly supernatural phenomenon. It is a profound fruit of faith that God produces in our lives. And we ought to pray for this. We ought to ask that God will humble us and give us grateful hearts and give us a greater understanding of His sovereign goodness. He can do that. We've seen Him do it! I'm sure many of us can look back on significant trials in our lives and recognize that apart from God's grace, it would have devastated us. We would have wallowed in self-pity, or become embittered, or depressed. But instead, even though there was discouragement, and probably some self-pity and bitterness, there was also a sense of joy, knowing that God was in control and had a good plan. That is an amazing evidence of God's grace! It is not something that we could produce on our own. It is contrary to our sinful nature. And therefore when we see this joy in the midst of trials (in our own hearts or in another brother or sister in Christ), we should marvel at God's power to bring this about.

### **The Testing of Your Faith**

Verse 3 speaks of "The Testing of Your Faith." Here we're given a foundation for the command in verse 2. The command in verse 2 is to count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds." Now James grounds that command with the statement in verse 3. The NASB literally translates verse 3, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." The first word of verse 3 is a participle—"knowing." James doesn't make explicit the logical connection between verses 2-3, but it's easy to understand what he's saying. He's saying, "Count it all joy . . . because you know this." The word "because" is not there in the Greek, but that's the appropriate way to understand what is being said here. That's why the NIV reads, "because you know," and the ESV, "for you know." The truth of verse 3 is the foundation for the command in verse 2.

And what is the truth of verse 3? First of all, it has to do with knowing something. "for you *know* . . ." Let's not move past this too quickly. We must know biblical truth in order to live godly lives. Do want to be able to count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds? Well, it's going to involve knowing some things. You need to understand some important truths from God's Word. You need to comprehend the Gospel. The lesson here is that we can't think we're going to grow in godliness if we're not growing in our knowledge of biblical truth. We have to know these things, and that knowledge must engage our hearts and transform our lives. So we can have joy in trials because we know something.

"For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." To understand this better I want to look at the one other place in the New Testament where this word "testing" shows up. It's in 1 Peter 1:7, where Peter writes, "In this you rejoice,

though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” That phrase translated, “the tested genuineness of your faith,” is the same phrase in James 1:3, “the testing of your faith.” And the way Peter uses this illustration is helpful for understanding what James is saying. The picture here is the refinement and purification of precious metals. These metals have to go through the fire—they have to be heated to extreme temperatures—in order to get rid of the imperfections and impurities. The process begins with ore: iron ore, gold ore, lead ore. But the ore only becomes valuable if it can be purified. You don’t see women wearing jewelry made of gold ore, because it’s ugly. And hopefully you don’t find buildings made of iron ore, because it’s weak. But when the impurities are removed, through fire, then the ore becomes something beautiful, something strong. That’s the illustration that Peter and James are both using. Peter argues from the lesser to the greater. He is saying, If gold is so precious, and it has to be tested by fire, how much more precious is the tested genuineness of your faith!

Our faith must be tested. It must be refined. God must take us through the fire in order to remove our impurities and imperfections and make us stronger. This is how we are sanctified. Have you noticed that it’s usually in the most difficult times of life that God teaches us the most significant lessons? I don’t know about you, but I don’t come back from vacation thinking, “Wow! God is changing me and refining me and teaching me some powerful lessons.” I come back from vacation refreshed, which is good. But it’s the hard things that mature us. It’s going through the fire that removes the imperfections. It’s this testing that produces steadfastness. Encountering various trials is the crucible in which our faith is refined.

Let’s ask the question: How is this? How is it that trials serve as a crucible? How do trials refine our faith? Trials refine our faith because they increase our hope in God, and they decrease the confidence we have in ourselves. I said earlier how we can be tempted to respond to trials with a prideful attitude, thinking we can handle this. But as God refines us through these trials, He teaches us that we *cannot* make it on our own. We can’t rely on our own strength. We must rely on Him, and on Him alone. This is a very humbling realization, and it’s also very freeing. It brings great hope.

Also, as God leads us through trials, and we see God sustain us through those trials, we have hope in His ability to see us through the next trial. At least, this is what *should* happen. Often we have very short memories when it comes to remembering God’s faithfulness to us. But we should be able to look at how God has been with us in past trials, and how He is with us in present trials, and know that He will also be with us in future trials. And as we see the work He’s doing in our lives through these trials, we can have confidence that we truly belong to Him, and thus we have hope.

Look at Romans 5:1-5. Notice how verse 3 is so similar to our verses in James. “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing [because we know; NIV] that suffering produces endurance.” But then the list continues, “endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame . . .” This is the refinement of our faith through trials, and it gives us hope.

If you’re an unbeliever here this morning, I want to speak to you specifically for a moment. This hope that I’m talking about is only available to those who trust in Jesus

Christ for the forgiveness of their sin. You see, all of us have sinned against God. We have disobeyed Him. We turn our back on Him and we run after other things to make us happy. Because of our sin, we deserve eternal punishment. That's what we all deserve, and if you are still living in rebellion against God, if you are not trusting in Christ alone, then you will receive that eternal punishment. Apart from Christ there is NO hope. Apart from Christ, your trials will NOT produce endurance or character or hope. Apart from Christ, your life will be futile, and then you'll die and spend eternity in hell.

So I plead with you: Come to Christ! Trust in Him. He died on the cross for sinners like you and like me, and He rose from the dead on the third day. In Him there is hope. In Him there is forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life with Him in heaven. One of the great promises of the Bible is found in Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." That is amazing promise, that *all things* will somehow work together for our good. But notice that this is a promise for those who love God, those who are called according to his purpose. In other words, this is a promise for all Christians. But if you are not a Christian, then you can have no hope in the midst of your trials. You can have no confidence that these trials are going to work together for good, unless you come to Christ. Repent of your sin, and trust in Jesus. And you will find this hope that Paul writes about and the joy that James writes about. You will see everything from a new perspective. There will be genuine hope—confident hope—even in the midst of the most difficult trials.

### **Steadfastness**

Finally we come to verse 4, "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." The word for steadfastness here in verse 3 and verse 4, means "to remain under." It's the picture of someone bearing a burden, and remaining under that burden for a long time. This is perseverance, endurance, steadfastness. To bear up under a trial, or various trials, and to keep going. Your job (in the workplace or in the home) is difficult, but you persevere in it. The marriage is hard, but you remain committed and work toward reconciliation and harmony. The ministry God has called you to is out of your comfort zone, but you press on. God will produce steadfastness in us as He refines our faith through trials. That's the truth of verse 3: "the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." And then verse 4 is another command: "let steadfastness have its full effect." Endure! Persevere!

And then the second half of the verse reveals the purpose of this steadfastness. Steadfastness is not the ultimate goal. It leads to something else. The purpose of steadfastness is complete Christian maturity, "that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." There is no implication here that we will attain perfection in this life. But this remains the goal. The word can also be translated, "mature" or "complete" or "whole." The two words are very similar in meaning. The purpose of our endurance is that we would grow into Christian maturity and wholeness and completion. Our hope should be that as we persevere and are strengthened by trials, we will become more like Jesus, that we will have more wisdom, more faith, less doubt, and that we will be single-minded and stable. This is what the next section of verses will discuss further.

I want to close by looking at two biblical examples of perseverance under trial. One is from the Old Testament and one from the New. There are many we might think of. In chapter 5 of James, he mentions Job as an example of steadfastness, and we'll

consider him when we get to chapter 5. But recently I was preaching through Genesis, and I think of Joseph as someone who endured various trials. His brothers hated him. They almost killed him, and then sold him into slavery. In Egypt Joseph was accused falsely by Potiphar's wife, and he was sent to prison. In prison he helped the cupbearer, but then the cupbearer forgot about Joseph for two whole years. Just imagine the bitterness and resentment and hatred that we would feel if those things happened to us. Imagine the desire we would have for revenge. But by God's grace Joseph was able to bear up under these various trials, and he was able to consider it all joy. That doesn't mean he always felt joyful. That doesn't mean he didn't struggle with bitterness and self-pity. But he knew that God was with him, and he knew that the testing of his faith would produce steadfastness. And he persevered, so that he might become mature and complete. And the evidence of grace in his life is seen so vividly in how he dealt with his brothers. He had the opportunity to exact revenge, but instead he forgave them. And he told them, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph saw his trials in the bigger picture of God's sovereignty and God's goodness. He could have been so embittered and enraged if he had viewed his trials through the narrow lens of his own "rights" and his own worth and his own selfish desires. But God enabled him to see these things through the wide lens of God's rights and God's worth and God's good plan.

Let Joseph be an example to you in the midst of your trials. Cling to the promise that, though others may have evil intentions, God is working all things together for your good, if you are a Christian.

Another powerful example of perseverance and joy in the midst of trials is found in the New Testament in Acts 5. The apostles were arrested and put in prison. And then during the night "an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out" and told them to keep preaching (Acts 5:19-20). The captain of the temple and the chief priests were perplexed about what had happened. But then someone saw the apostles teaching in the temple, and they were brought before the council. And the high priest said, "'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him'" (verses 28-32). The council didn't like these words. It says, "When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them." But a Pharisee named Gamaliel stepped in and advised them to leave these men alone. And they took his advice. Rather than killing them, they just beat them. Verse 40 says, "when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." Then verse 41 is such an amazing example of joy in suffering. It says, "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

That's perseverance and joy in the midst of suffering. I pray that God will enable us to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds, and that the trials in our lives

will produce steadfastness, and that we will endure, so that we might grow in holiness and wisdom and Christian maturity.