

Counting Trials All Joy

Spiritual Maturity

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Bible Text: James 1:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, August 20, 2023

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For the scripture reading we turn to James chapter 1. The general epistle of James chapter 1. The text is chapter 1, verses 2 through 4. Beginning to make headway in our series on this letter. Let's read the first 12 verses of James chapter 1.

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. 2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. 4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting [lacking] nothing. 5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. 7 For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. 8 A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. 9 Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: 10 But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. 11 For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace [the beauty] of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. 12 Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

So far we will read God's holy and infallible word.

The text is verses 2 through 4.

2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. 4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our first sermon in this new series on James, we had a general introduction to the book as a whole, and we saw some very interesting features about this book. First, we saw that this book was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus and the brother of Jude. And this James was a very prominent leader in the church at Jerusalem and his name comes up a few times in the New Testament, perhaps especially in Acts chapter 15. Second, we saw that this book, this letter of James, is probably the first New Testament book to be written. It's probably the earliest book in the New Testament canon, written probably before Paul's missionary journeys. It's a book written, a letter written at a time when Christians were predominantly from a Jewish background, they had converted from Judaism to Christianity, and it's a book written from Jerusalem to the saints who had fled away from Jerusalem because of heavy persecution. And third, we also saw that this book of James, this letter is a very practical letter. There's very little mention of Jesus. and the work of Jesus on the cross. There's very little mention of his death and resurrection, if at all. Instead, the book gives us commandment after commandment, 59 commandments in the space of 108 verses and you see that right away in verse 2. James doesn't give any blessing like the Apostle Paul usually does, but he gets right to business, we might say, and in verse 2, James gives the command, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations." So right away, we see how practical this book is.

The question that I want to raise by introduction to the sermon this evening is this: why does James begin his letter this way? Why does James immediately begin by speaking about trials? Is it just because these saints were being persecuted and that's what James has in mind, he wants to encourage them as they suffer persecution? I think there's something more basic going on here and something even more weighty than just persecution. We'll hopefully see this more clearly through the course of the sermon this evening, but I want to mention it right away because I think this is really the take-home of the whole sermon this evening. Listen to this, what James wants to do in these verses right at the very beginning is teach these saints a certain mindset and a certain worldview. James wants these saints to whom he writes to look at the world a certain way. He is concerned about their heart, and the condition of their heart. And remember what we said last time, James has a concern that these saints might be content with saying that they are Christians, but they don't actually care to live like Christians, or to use the familiar language of James chapter 2, James is concerned that these Christians say they have faith, but there appears to be little in the way of works that are the evidence of a true faith. They're not actually living out their faith in their day-to-day lives. As James says, faith without works is dead. To put it another way, James is writing to people who know their doctrine, they know their scriptures. They're from a Jewish background. They know who Jesus is as the Messiah. But what they are struggling with is the actual living in holiness and having a life and a posture and a disposition that matches up with their confession as Christians. To a certain degree, they are showing themselves to be immature Christians and James, in true love, is urging them to press toward a greater spiritual maturity. And so right away, in the very first command, the very first instruction that he gives, he writes, "My brethren, the goal of life is not to find maximum pleasure. Christians do not live for sensual earthly pleasure. No, rather, our goal is spiritual maturity and spiritual fortitude, not a pain-free life."

So when you come across all different kinds of trials, count it, all joy. Why? Because God is going to use these trials to refine you, to sharpen you, to strengthen you, and to bring you up to greater spiritual maturity and as Christians, that's what we want. That's really the essence of this text before us this evening and the question that we're confronted with as we begin looking at this passage is this: is that what I want? Do I want to be a more complete Christian? Do I actually want to bring forth good fruit to God's glory? Or am I still prioritizing, concerned about earthly pleasure, earthly prosperity, earthly comfort above spiritual maturity? We take as our theme, "Counting Trials All Joy," and we look at that theme under three points. First, we look at the amazing calling. Second, we look at the powerful reason. And then third, we end with a final question.

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations." There's a few things to notice here about verse 2 and this amazing calling. First of all, notice the love that James has for these saints. He refers to them as "my brethren." James is a prominent leader in the church at Jerusalem. James is the half-brother of Jesus. But none of that really matters. James says, "You are my brothers. You are my brothers and sisters in Christ. We're all part of the same family. And as my brothers and sisters, I love you and I want your good." And throughout this letter, James is going to use some very blunt language, even some very scathing language at times, but through it all, his heart attitude is this, "I love you as my brothers and sisters in Christ, and I want you to hear these commands because I bring them in love."

Second of all, notice the word temptations, "count it all joy when he fall into diverse temptations," and what we should be aware of right away is that James is talking here about trials. He's not talking, children, he's not talking about falling into temptation in the sense that we succumb to a temptation and we fall into sin. It doesn't mean rejoice in that. No, he's talking about trials. And now in the King James, the word temptation is used because in the original, it's that same word. In the King James, the word temptation, as we read it, can be used to refer to either a trial or a temptation and that's true with the original word. It can be used, depending on the context, to refer either to a trial or to a temptation. Here in James 1, verse 2, he's clearly talking about trials. Even in verse 3, you see that come out, "Knowing this, that the trying, the trial of your faith worketh patience."

Now what's the difference, briefly, between a trial and a temptation? Well, a trial is of God and God uses trials to strengthen us and purify us. Trials are the difficult circumstances that God leads us into as part of our pathway in this life. But you see, when God sends us trials, then Satan comes along and turns that trial also into a temptation and a temptation is this, a temptation when we're making this distinction, a temptation is when something that is sinful is made to appear good and attractive and desirable. And God never does that. God never tries to lure us to sin as if he makes sin look attractive to us. That's a temptation and that's what Satan does. God tries us. He brings us through difficult circumstances in order to strengthen us and try us and then Satan comes along and tries to tempt us.

So James is writing here about trials, and he's writing about diverse trials, the text says. That is, all different kinds of trials. "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into, when you come across all different kinds of trials in life." And immediately we could ask, what are the trials that you are experiencing right now and that I'm experiencing? Well, for the saints to whom James writes, a big trial was persecution and because of that persecution, one of the big trials was also poverty, scraping by, and one of the big trials was being taken advantage of by others because they were poor. But again, James is very general here. He has in mind all the diverse different kinds of trials of life, sickness, loneliness, the death of a loved one, when friends betray you, maybe financial stress, maybe a difficult marriage, or we might say maybe difficult children, loss of your job when your house burns down, caring for aging parents. But again, I want to emphasize that James is being very general. He's not so concerned about what the trial is, he's focused on how we respond to the trial, what is our attitude. And that's where I think I can make this point also that James is not intending that these verses be used as the first word in grief counseling, so that James is saying that when a loved one dies in a tragic car accident, immediately we should bring this kind of a word and say, "Count it joy. Count it all joy that your loved one died because God has a good purpose in this." Now, that's not what Jesus did either, when Lazarus died. He doesn't say, "Count it all joy." Remember, he first comforted Mary and Martha with the hope of the gospel, and then he also wept with them. Now we know that God does have a good purpose in everything, but James is addressing something more than just the hour of tragedy, or the hour of crisis. He's addressing something more general and I want to reiterate what I said in the introduction. James wants these saints to have the proper worldview. He wants them to look at the world a certain way. This is a general command he is giving them.

So again, the trials that James is referring to are very general. It's the trial, for example, of the high school student who's having to get back in school mode, having to do his homework again and it seems boring and tedious, and he has to learn his catechism memory work, she has to learn her catechism memory work again and it takes work. It's a trial. It's the trial of having your boyfriend or your girlfriend break up with you. It's the trial of the daily grind at work. It's the trial of a newly married couple striving to learn how to live together. It's the trial of not being able to have children or it's the trial of pregnancy and mood swings and morning sickness. It's the trial of a baby crying in the middle of the night, or a little children making a mess in the kitchen. It's the trial of locking the keys in your car once again, but you're in a rush, or the trial of your car breaking down on the side of the road. Maybe it's the trial of getting cut from the soccer team or the basketball team, or having the cows break through the fence and you have to gather them back in again. It's the trial of disciplining your children on a daily basis, dealing perhaps with the same sin again and again. It's the trial not only of poverty, but the trial of riches. Maybe it's the trial of dealing with the mess from a house renovation. Maybe it's the trial of retirement and having too much time on your hands and you're wondering if you're really spending too much time golfing or fishing. Maybe health issues arise as you get older. Or maybe you wonder if you've really laid aside enough money for the next 20 years.

These and many other things are the trials of life. That's what James is talking about. He's talking about diverse trials and James writes these are trials that we fall into. We're not looking for them. They simply come upon us. They're not planned. They're not expected. Suddenly we have to deal with something we weren't prepared for. We fall into them and the issue is this, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to handle these trials? What is our attitude to these trials supposed to be? Well, there are a few things we are not supposed to do. We're not supposed to grumble or complain or murmur. That doesn't really do any good anyway, does it? We all do it, but it only makes things worse, doesn't it? So that we maybe even begin to question God's wisdom and goodness. Maybe we bring others down with us. We're not supposed to do that. We're not supposed to lose our temper and get angry. We're not supposed to turn to alcohol or drugs as if alcohol is my hope and my confidence in this trial, that that's the God that I look to and worship. We're not supposed to have a fatalistic or impersonal attitude that says, "Well, all these trials are meaningless anyway. Life goes on. Let's go with the flow because it's all meaningless." That's not a Christian attitude either. We're not supposed to respond with doubt and start saying, "How can God do this to me?"

Those are things we're not supposed to do. There's a few things we can do. We can pray. We can ask God to show us the way of escape because he says in his word with every temptation, he also makes a way of escape. "Lord, show me that way of escape. Help me to apply biblical principles to this situation." We can recall Bible passages that we've memorized, this would be a good Bible passage to memorize to help shape us in the moment of our trials. We can ask others for advice. We can ask our parents. We can ask aged members, those who are spiritually gifted, older men and women in the congregation. But what the text before us this evening says is something different. What the text says is this, "Count it all joy." When you fall into diverse trials, God's word says you are to count it all joy.

Now, let's be clear. James is not telling us that the trials themselves are joyful. We know Hebrews chapter 12, right, chastening for the present time is not joyous but it's grievous. We all know that and experience that. James is not telling us that when a loved one suddenly dies, we should be skipping and jumping for joy. No. James is not talking about some flighty emotion. Notice how James puts it, count it all joy, that is, reckon it, judge it to be all joy. Consider, consider your trials a reason for joy. I think that's probably the nicest way to put it for us. Consider your trials a reason for joy. You can have comfort and joy in these trials.

And then he says, count it all joy, or as some translations put it, consider it pure joy. Consider it pure joy when you fall into diverse trials. Consider your trials not a mixture of good and bad, half good and half bad, consider them 100% good. Even as Jesus puts it, "Blessed are you, happy are you, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. You are blessed. You are happy."

And when the text says, count it all joy, what the text is talking about here is the exercise of faith. This is something we do by faith. This is the judgment that faith makes. Faith considers it all joy when we fall into various trials. By nature, we can't do this. We don't

do this. By nature, we complain and grumble. To our flesh, our trials are a curse and a disaster and we say to ourselves, "This is the last thing I need right now." Or we say, "Why does this always happen to me?" And then we cry in self-pity. And then you see we have all the right doctrine, we have this good outward confession, but the way we actually live and the attitude we actually have in life is offensive to God. But true faith behaves this way. Faith says, "Yes, I can count it all joy and I will count it all joy." What James is emphasizing is the exercise of faith and what does faith do? Faith clings to the promises of God. Faith puts everything in the context of the death and resurrection of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the one unto whom I belong with body and soul, both in life and death. Faith puts everything in the context of who I am as the child of God. God is my Father and he is both able to work all things together for my good, being Almighty God, and he is also willing to work all things together for my good, being a faithful Father. I am the elect, redeemed, regenerated child of God. I have been made a believer in Jesus Christ. All this is God's love and grace towards me. I'm a chosen vessel and God says that he will work all things together for my good. He will avert all evil or turn it to my profit.

And when I complain and murmur, that's when I'm going to stray right away. I'm like Israel in the wilderness wanderings. God is leading me to the Promised Land. He knows how to get me there. He knows the way and yet all the while, I'm murmuring and complaining, meanwhile God is leading me to the land flowing with milk and honey. That's not how true faith behaves. Scripture says, count it all joy. Count it pure joy when you fall into various trials and that's how true faith behaves itself. By faith, I do count it pure joy when I fall into various trials.

That's quite a word, isn't it, beloved, especially when it comes to you at the very beginning of the letter that you've just received from James, leader in the church at Jerusalem, or, I should say, when you receive it from the Holy Spirit and you read it as a command of God. This is not just a suggestion. This is not just advice. This is instruction that God gives his people through his holy word. This is a calling we are commanded to carry out. Let me ask you, let me ask myself, are we rejoicing in our trials? I can say it very distinctly. This past week I was working on this and then something came across my path and I groaned and I murmured in my own heart. Are we rejoicing in our trials? Are we saying, "This is good. I am content. I am at peace. I can even take a holy, sober joy in this trial because I know what God's going to do with this for me as his child."

Well, let me ask you this, this is a more basic question: are you rejoicing, am I rejoicing in our salvation? You see, that's basic, isn't it? I know who I am in Jesus Christ. I know who I am as a member of the body of Christ. You know that. You know what Jesus did for you. He suffered and died for your sins that you might not only escape punishment, but that you might instead be given all the blessings of salvation and eternal life with the Lord. Are you rejoicing in that? And then, rejoicing in that, are you rejoicing in your trials? And are you considering it pure joy when you fall into various trials?

Well, in the text, God in his mercy and goodness gives us a reason we should count it all joy when we fall into diverse temptations. He doesn't just say it. He says, "Look, there's

something here that is good reason for you to count it joy." Why should we count it all joy when we fall into diverse temptations? Because of this, because you know that the trying of your faith works patience, verse 3. You know that the various trials God puts you through have spiritual value. God has a purpose with the trial he gives you. There is nothing wasted or superfluous in this trial. God has a good purpose with the trial he gives you and what is his purpose? To work patience in you more and more.

You see, trials are one way in which God sanctifies us. The word trying in verse 3 has the idea of to test something in order that it might be approved. So the idea is not this, that God is testing our faith in order to see whether we have faith or not. No, God knows we have true faith. God is the one who has given us that true faith. God does not test us in order to see whether we have true faith or not, to see whether he can destroy that true faith either. But the idea is this, God tries our faith, he tests our faith in order that our faith might be strengthened and shown to be true, genuine faith. Just like gold is tested by biting on it, or gold is tested by putting it through the fire, the fiery trials, so that it might be shown to be pure gold, so God tests us and tests our faith by using trials.

And through the trial, God strengthens our faith. As God leads us through the trial, what happens is this, by faith, because we're living out of Christ, because Christ is in us, we do cling more tightly to the promises of God. We search the scriptures more diligently. We plunge deeper into this relationship that God has established with us through Christ. We go into his word. We lay hold on them and his promises more fiercely. And then through all of that, we come to see who God is more clearly as our God. We come to see his attributes, his wisdom and his power and his goodness, and we come to see through it all just how perfect and complete our salvation is and how safe we actually are in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

God brings us closer to himself through the trial. He shows us his love and his faithfulness in new and deeper ways and then this, through it all, we grow in the spiritual virtue of patience. And what is patience? "Knowing this, that the trial of your faith worketh patience." Well, the word patience here means to bear up under something and the word means something like this, perseverance or endurance, even steadfastness or fortitude. When we are patient, it means we are bearing up under a burden and we persevere, and we persevere because we know our trials do not come to us by chance, but they come to us by the hand of our heavenly Father. So I can persevere, I can be patient. We persevere because we know that his will is good and perfect and better than mine. And we persevere because all of this understand because God sustains us, right, God preserves us, but we persevere because we know that he is working through these trials to lead us to glory. And fourth, we are trusting that God knows the burden we can bear and he will supply the grace needed to bear it. That's patience and God works that patience in us through the trials of life by his Holy Spirit and that's a reason we can count it all joy when we fall into diverse temptations, because we know our heavenly Father is going to work on us, he's going to work in us, that we might grow in patience in this exercise of faith.

And beloved, you know this. That's the first word of verse 3, "Knowing this." You know this. You know by your own experience that the trying of your faith works patience. God says it will happen, but we know it by experience so that through the trials of life, you've grown to trust God more. You have grown in your relationship with him more deeply. You have seen how he is so perfectly faithful. You've learned to rely more on him and not on your own arm of strength. That's what trials have done for you and that's a blessing, beloved. We want strong faith and so we do count it all joy when we fall into various trials, because God is going to work on us, shaping us, conforming us more and more to the image of Jesus, and that really leads us into verse 4. We might ask, why is patience so valuable? Right, why do we want patience? Verse 4, "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." That you might be complete and whole, lacking nothing. That's the idea. The idea is this, patience itself is going to go to work on you. God is going to use trials to work patience in you, and then patience itself is going to do its work in you. And then the warning that James gives is this, don't impede that work of patience. You must not become impatient, but rather you must cultivate patience, exercise yourself in it, and let it have its good fruit.

Let patience have her perfect work. Let patience work in you, we might say, and do its thing. Maybe another way of putting it is like this, let patience come to its perfection in you. We have patience. This is a fruit of the Spirit. We do have a small beginning of spiritual patience but it's so imperfect, isn't it? It's such a small beginning. So let patience come to its perfect and complete expression in you. That's what he is saying, writing. And what is that? What is the good work that patience works within us? Well, it's this, complete and joyful submission to God's will. That's what perfect patience is, complete and joyful submission to God's will. That's what patience will work within us, perfect trust in God, perfect submission to his will, and a perfect recognition that God is doing a good thing through these trials. To be perfectly patient is this, to walk in that uninterrupted fellowship with God, trusting him as my God, waiting on him as my God, praising him all the while, obeying him through it all, submitting to him, trusting him. That's patience.

In a word, the perfect work of patience is this, sanctification, being made holy, just like Jesus was perfectly holy. Those passages in the quote for contemplation are very striking, aren't they? You almost wouldn't say it yourself, but it's in scripture. He was made spiritually complete and mature, made perfect through the things that he suffered and endured, and his spiritual maturity was put on display in the end by all the things that he suffered. That's exactly what verse 4 says, "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect," complete and whole, "lacking nothing." When you are exercised in the spiritual practice of patience, you are sanctified, God cleanses you and purifies you, makes you more and more holy. That's what God's purposes are with the trials in your life, to conform you and me more and more to the image of Christ, to cleanse us and make us mature. That's why the theme for our series is what it is, pressing towards spiritual maturity. That's what the words perfect and entire mean. That's why James begins his letter with this on his mind, because that's what he's concerned about, that they be spiritually mature, not lacking anything, so that your Christian character is filled out, so that you are a well-rounded Christian, and you're not lacking anything.

And when I say that and when we use this language, I can't help but think of one of the qualifications for an elder is that he not be a novice. That is, that he not be spiritually young in the faith. Why not? Well, because one who is spiritually young in the faith hasn't had his faith tried and tested. He hasn't simply had time enough to have his faith sufficiently tested so that he's brought to spiritual maturity. And you all know what I'm talking about. Talk to the elderly saints. Talk to those who have gone before you, who've gone through the trials of life. Talk to that Christian man, that Christian woman who has seen trials, all kinds of trials, and what are you going to see? We've all seen it by God's grace, we see spiritual maturity that in some ways is not matched by others in the church. It's an amazing thing. The trials are hard, very hard, but God has used those trials to further perfect and mature his saints and you can see it. You can see it in their lives, in their attitudes, in their patience, maybe in their compassion towards others, how they're so selfless, how they can seem to bear what looked to us like heavy crosses quite gracefully. And we say, "How? I would get crushed under that cross." Well, it's because patience has had its perfect work. It's because God has tried their faith and has strengthened them and has drawn them unto himself in a closer relationship with him and that's where you begin to see Jesus' beauty shining through them more and more. And you see it.

And when we fall into various trials, that's the reason we can count it all joy. God is going to do a good work in me through this trial, and that makes me happy. Even as I weep, even as I struggle, even as I pour out my heart to God, crying for help, and maybe I'm diving into the Bible more deeply because of my struggles. I do know because God's word also says it in this part of scripture he's going to do a good thing through this. He's going to bring me to greater spiritual maturity and that makes me happy because it's going to be to the glory of his name in my life because that's what spiritual maturity does. It causes me to live more for him and his glory and that's what I want.

The question that I want to leave you with is this. So we've looked at the amazing calling. We've looked at the powerful reason, and now I want to leave you with a final question. The question I want to leave you with is this and this is a hard question, perhaps, but this is an opportunity for myself, for self-examination, and for all of us for self-examination. And the question I want to leave you with is this: is this what you actually care about in life? Do you actually want spiritual maturity or not? Do you actually want to grow in godliness or do you want to continue to act as one who is spiritually immature, having fun, partying, just having a merry old time of life? What do you actually want in life? I bring this up because I want to come full circle and I want to emphasize what I emphasized in the introduction. This is what James is concerned about. He's concerned about the spiritual maturity of his brothers and sisters in the faith. They have all kinds of knowledge, doctrinal knowledge here and there, but how are they actually dealing with the trials of life? Are they living in holiness? And James wants them to have this attitude. He wants them to have this way of thinking. He wants them to be those who desire spiritual maturity.

There are perhaps people walking around today who say, "I'm a Christian. I have faith. I'm a believer." But they continue to walk in sin. Maybe they walk in constant self-pity, and they walk in bitterness and anger. They constantly murmur and complain about life or about other people. And then when they have time alone to themselves, or there is no real reason to murmur or complain, then they indulge in the lusts of the flesh, whatever those lusts may be and James writes, "My brethren, all these trials you are going through, regard it as joy because trials produce maturity." And either you are brought to that spiritual maturity and that's a joyful thing, or maybe what happens is that your faith is shown to be a dead faith, an inauthentic faith. Rather than blaming God for your trials or blaming others for your trials, count it joy because at the center of your being in your heart as a Christian, what you really want is to be holy. What you and I really want is to please God. What I really want is to be more conformed to the image of my Savior Jesus Christ and that's what God is going to do through this trial.

So, beloved, I ask you again, as I need to ask myself, and this is a hard question: do you actually, it's a simple question one way, but it's a hard question in another way, do you actually want spiritual maturity? If you do, count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations. And if you do want spiritual maturity but you struggle with this passage, then ask God for wisdom, wisdom to submit to his commandments, wisdom to see things more and more with the eye of faith, wisdom to see things more and more as God himself sees them. That's what James goes on to touch on. That's what we're going to look at next time, asking for wisdom, wisdom for just this kind of a way of looking at the world. Amen.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for thy word. Thy word is good and thy word is right. Give us the spiritual posture of putting ourselves under thy word, heeding it, and seeing its truth and its goodness for us, and use this preaching to shape our hearts and our lives that we might count it all joy in all the trials of life, knowing that thou wilt use this to perfect us, that even more glory and honor might be given unto thee. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.