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Lesson 2 — *Real Faith: Real Faith Endures in Trials (1:1-12), Part 1*

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as “a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that.” Yuck! But, sometimes, we sense the truth of that. The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life to “an onion—you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep.” These men are merely echoes of the truth revealed in the oldest book of the Bible, the book of Job. Job declared in “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward” (5:7) and again, “Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble” (14:1). As surely as the ashes from a midsummer’s night campfire float up to the heavens, so certainly do trials descend upon mankind. Trials are the stuff of life.

And so, there is perhaps no more of an appropriate context for James to start with as he begins his discourse on the nature of real faith. After all, the dear Christians to whom he is writing were facing severe trials of their own. James writes “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (v. 1). Many of these Jewish Christians were former members of his church in Jerusalem, but they have now been scattered (cf. Acts 8:1), forced out of their homes apart from their loved ones away from their livelihood.

Therefore, James writes first concerning how real faith handles trials. In James 1:2-12, James shows that real faith endures in trials. Now, he has much to say about such endurance, so let’s start by making three introductory observations from verse 2.

The Reality of Trials (v. 2)

1. *They are certain (“when”).*

James makes this point by simply using the word “when” instead of “if.” Furthermore, the particular word he uses means “pertaining to an action that is conditional, possible, and, in many instances, repeated.”¹ Indeed, trials are not a possibility, but an inevitability. They are a universal and unavoidable fact of life (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13).

2. *They are unpredictable (“meet”).*

The KJV translation of “fall into” is to be preferred here over the ESV’s rendering “meet”. Far from referencing a casual encounter, the word literally means “to experience somewhat suddenly that which is difficult or bad.”² This word is employed in biblical usage to describe a boat striking ground and becoming wrecked (Acts 27:41) and a man who is assaulted by thieves (Luke 10:30). Clearly, James uses it to highlight the unpredictable, often surprising nature of trials. They come unannounced and unforeseen.

3. *They are diverse (“various kinds”).*

Trials are various and diverse, similar only in their universal impact. In this passage Jewish Christians have been persecuted and are far from home, dealing with all the challenges such sudden displacement produces. In our life contexts, each of us have dealt with and will deal with a myriad of problems, many of which differ significantly from the issues others are facing. While trials might be “common to man”, they are often uniquely tailored in their form, timing, and severity. Frequent or far apart, irritating or terrifying, inconveniencing or life-changing, major or minor—such are the poles on the broad spectrum of trials.

Furthermore, one difficult situation can spawn other difficult situations, and a physical trial, for example, can create a financial trial (e.g., paying for large medical bills). Trials are rarely single and simple, but are instead often complex and confusing. How comforting it is, then, to hear in our trial—whatever that may be—“My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The Nature of Trials (v. 2)

In 1:2-18, James uses one Greek word (*peirasmos*) that is translated in our English versions with two different senses: throughout verses 2-12, it is consistently rendered “trial” (vv. 2, 12) or “test” (v. 3); in verses 13-18, it is consistently translated “temptation”. These two nuances are reflected in the lexicons, too: “an attempt to learn the nature or character of something” (i.e., “test, trial”) or “an attempt to make one do something wrong” (i.e., “temptation, enticement”).³

In using this word in both senses, James is alluding to both a general category and its specific types. Throughout the whole passage (1:2-18), James is generally or broadly describing the “testing” of real faith. Specifically, he describes the test of “trials” in verses 2-12 and the test of “temptation” in verses 13-18.

Trials may be more external, and temptations may be more internal; trials may more be something that happen to us, while temptations more arise from within us; trials may need to be borne, while temptations must be resisted—but they both are interrelated (e.g., a trial may produce a temptation; resisting a temptation may invite a trial), and they both are tests that reveal the genuineness and character of our faith.

This nature or purpose of trials is further emphasized by the word “testing” (Gk. *dokimion*) in verse 3 (and again in verse 12—“stood the test”). This word can refer either to the process (James 1:3) or result (1 Peter 1:7) of testing something in order to determine its genuineness. Someone has said, “A faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted.” And so, like a prospector biting into a gold nugget to test its quality, God allows our faith to be tried to reveal its validity and value.

Such is the nature of a trial—it is a test, a homework assignment, a worksheet, a spiritual project. In the classroom of life, it is meant to determine what kind of student we are. Have we really learned the material (i.e., is our faith real)? Are we applying the concepts (i.e., is our faith growing and maturing)? Are we getting help from the teacher (i.e., are we teachable and dependent upon God)? Without homework, the teacher has difficulty tracking the progress of his students. Trials are the homework of life that help us evaluate our spiritual condition.

And while these tests are always for God’s glory and our good, they may also be given to *us* for the sake of *others*. After all, seniors tutor freshmen, and so those who have experienced the spiritual tests of life make an impact on those around them. Passively, many watch them and take notes (e.g., as you and I do when we consider Joseph or Daniel). Actively, many ask them and are educated by them (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us understand then what is the very nature and purpose of the trials God ordains for us. They are not merely tragedies, and they are never trivial. They are tests—not meant to discourage or destroy, but to evaluate and affirm and strengthen and teach. So as good students, may we humbly and dependently embrace them, trusting the kind and intentional sovereignty of God.

The Response to Trials (v. 2)

In fact, James actually gives tangible definition to the way in which we should embrace our trials. He says we are to “count [our trials] all joy” (v. 2). This word “count” means “to engage in an intellectual process, to think.”⁴ When used as a participial noun, it means “to lead or guide.”⁵ This is a uniquely intentional and useful word that James employs here.

Experience teaches us that trials provoke our feelings and stir our emotions. When we enter into a situation of suffering, we immediately commence an emotional process. And that emotional process writes many words over the trial—“difficult”, “confusing”, “unfortunate”, “tragedy”, “unfair”, “frightening”, “hopeless”, “loss”, etc. Such a process, however, will never write the word “joy” over a trial. Such a thought feels trite, insensitive, careless. It feels almost blasphemous to suggest such a response!

James isn’t denouncing such an emotional process here. Rather, he affirms it as being quite natural. He does, after all, later in his letter, positively reference Job (5:11), a man that we know wrestled emotionally with his severe trial, and Elijah (5:17), who had a “nature like ours,” which literally refers to “having the same kinds of feelings or desires.”⁶ No, James is not criticizing the natural process of emotionally dealing with our trial. But he is admonishing us to make sure that we are simultaneously engaging in an intellectual process.

Considering our trial intellectually, we can write “joy” over it. And to do so is not a futile exercise in psychological wrangling or mental gymnastics. No, thinkingly, you can and should “count” your trial as an occasion for joy. When you do the math (so to speak), mentally counting the various aspects of your trials that you “know” (v. 3, another term of cognition), you should come to this conclusion: “I can chose joy in this circumstance” (cf. Philippians 3:1; 4:4). Again, James doesn’t view this as a coping mechanism or shallow suggestion. His use of the phrase “all joy” (translated variously as “pure joy”, “full joy”, or “complete joy”) simply means “real or genuine joy”. Emotionally, joy might seem like an inappropriate response; intellectually, joy is both a right and real response.

Furthermore, remember that when used as a participial noun, this word “count” means “to lead or guide”. Perhaps James is suggesting that while our whole personality (i.e., our feelings [emotion/heart], our thoughts [cognition/mind], and our desires [emotion/will]) wrestles with our trials, it is our mind that should lead and guide us. Certainly Luther agrees when he writes, “Feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving. My warrant is the Word of God—naught else is worth believing.”

So we should hasten to add what James inevitably assumes here. Joy is a right and real response only for those who have had their intellect born again and daily renewed by the Spirit of God through the Word of God (cf. Romans 12:2; Philippians 2:2, 5). Only the saved and sanctified intellect of a follower of Jesus can, like Him, endure the cross because of the joy set before him (Hebrews 12:2). Only the mind of the Christian has a firm foundation upon which to rest and a living fountain from which to continuously draw joy. The prophet Isaiah beautifully rendered it this way, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (12:3; cf. 26:3-4; consider how David does this in Psalm 42-43). That’s why this response is a mark of real faith, for only real faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ can rightly and really count a trial joy.

At age 17, Joni Eareckson Tada dove into a shallow river and was seriously injured, becoming a quadriplegic. Some 40 years later she wrote, “My affliction has stretched my hope, made me know Christ better, helped me long for truth, led me to repentance of sin, goaded me to give thanks in times of sorrow, increased my faith and

strengthened my character. Being in this wheelchair has meant knowing *Him* better, feeling His pleasure every day.”⁷ She quoted Henry Frost, who said, “I feel it would have been nothing short of a calamity to have missed the physical suffering through which I have passed.”⁸ Throughout her trial, Joni “counted” it carefully, with a believing and Bible-based mind, and she concluded that it was an occasion for joy.

Throughout verses 2-12, James highlights four realities about trials that Christians “know” that will help our sanctified minds to carefully consider our trials and enduringly “count” them “joy.” The Scriptures reveal many more than these four important truths for us to remind ourselves of in trials, but these four are a good place to start.

TRIALS MATURE OUR FAITH (vv. 2-4).

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

When trials come (aka tests), spiritual maturity is close behind—and for that we can rejoice in trials. That’s James’ point in verse 3-4.

1. Trials produce spiritual maturity.

a. Endurance (“steadfastness”)

Verse 3 plainly states that trials produce “steadfastness” or endurance. Because trials are usually take-home tests that stay with us for an extended period of time, they are the perfect tool for cultivating within us the important virtue of endurance.

Throughout the New Testament, the verb form of this word is used literally to describe the capacity “to stay in a place beyond an extended point of time, *remain*”⁹ (cf. Luke 2:43; Acts 17:14). Understandably, then, it is often used more metaphorically to speak of the ability “to maintain a belief or course of action in the face of opposition, *stand one’s ground, hold out*”¹⁰ (cf. James 4:11). Etymologically, this word is made up of two parts:

the main verb, *meno*, which means “to stay or remain” and the prefix, *hupo*, which means “under”. The sense, then, is quite clear—endurance is the ability to “stay under” a difficult, drawn-out situation.

This is a virtue that Peter says we must dependently add to our faith (2 Peter 1:6). What does it matter if you rejoice on the Monday of your trial, but despair on Tuesday through Friday? No, you must count your trial as an occasion for real joy, and you must do so over and over and over again. You must run with endurance, by looking unto Jesus, the One who endured for you (Hebrews 12:1-4). And when you fall down and fail to reach the conclusion of joy, you repent, get back up, ask God for help, and start counting it joy again. As long as your trial endures, you must endure with joy.

A trial provides an opportunity to evaluate the presence of this virtue in our Christian faith and to practice it. And this is a good thing! Endurance is absolutely necessary, for it is a fundamental quality of real faith. The book of Hebrews offers several warnings to those who will not endure but drift away (3:7-4:11; 5:11-6:20; 10:19-39; 12:18-29). If the testing of a trial produces no endurance, you have to ask yourself if you have real faith to begin with. Real faith will endure. Perseverance is a part of its genetic makeup, and a trial will draw out and strengthen this quality.

Now, when it comes to this wonderful fruit of testing, we must make sure we understand the kind and patient character of God in proctoring these tests. We should not imagine that God callously sends trials our way as a kind of endurance-making machine—line ‘em up, soak ‘em, wring ‘em out...endurance! No, God doesn’t simply “put us under the thumb,” force out some endurance, and then move on to the next test. We should not think of God as some mad scientist trying to torture his subjects to the breaking point. He is more like a personal trainer that expertly applies weight and pressure to tone, strengthen, and stretch our faith.

A truck manufacturer knows the load capacity of the truck it has built. With an understanding of the design of the chassis and frame and engine and transmission, it recommends a maximum Gross Vehicle Weight Rating (GVRW), that is, how much weight the truck can properly support and haul.

Likewise, the God who made us and knows our frame and remembers that we are but dust (Psalm 103:14), will never place upon us more than He knows we can remain under by His grace, in order that the pleasing and authenticating virtue of endurance might be cultivated within us (1 Corinthians 10:13).

So, unlike any other tool, a trial gives God the opportunity to produce within us the God-like and God-honoring trait of endurance, for His name’s sake. For that, we really can rejoice in our trial!

b. Completeness (“perfect”)

In our trials, we discover that the response of enduring joy also produces completeness, which is the idea underlying “perfect”. While simply referring to being mature or fully developed, this word can also connote that which “meets the highest standard,”¹¹ which we know to be the character of Jesus Christ. While James later admits that “we all stumble in many ways” (3:2; cf. 1 John 1:10), he also anticipates that we can grow increasingly complete in the very image of Jesus Christ (cf. Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:11-16). And that is what trials help accomplish.

God is absolutely committed to doing us good (Psalm 84:11), but we don’t always remember what His Word says that good is. According to Romans 8:28-30, the good for which God is always working all things together is our conformity into the image of His Son. And so, sometimes God sovereignly and wisely knows that nothing will contribute more to completing that image within us than ordaining a particular trial for us. And for this reason, we can count our trials as an occasion for joy!

c. Singularity (“complete”)

Our trials are further designed to develop within us a singularity of focus. While word “complete” is a bit hard to distinguish from the previous one, the lexical synonyms of “integrity”, “wholeness”, “blamelessness”, and “entirety” suggest the added dimension of being singular in our orientation. This understanding also seems to fit with the following verses in which James condemns duplicity (vv. 6-8).

And so, like for Abraham of old (Genesis 22), trials are sent to purify our heart from idols and distractions and to make us singularly devoted to God. And since He is the most desirable thing in all the world, a trial may become a joyful purge (cf. Psalm 73:21-22, 25-26)!

d. Fullness (“lacking in nothing”)

When we enduringly rejoice in our tests, we discover finally the blessing of spiritual fullness in our lives. James writes that a product of perseverance is the joy of “lacking in nothing.” Trials deepen our spiritual reservoir, teaching us what we might learn nowhere else, relating us to God in a way that nothing else does (i.e., “the fellowship of His suffering”—Philippians 3:10), strengthening us in areas that we might not even realize. Indeed, what joy there is in knowing that whatever the testing and trying of our faith takes away from us, it will infinitely replace (cf. Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

Paul absolutely agrees with James in seeing a blessed maturing effect to trials. He writes in Romans 5:3-5, “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Trials produce endurance, completeness of character, singularity of hope, and unashamed fullness from God. Truly, then, we might rightly and really count our trials joy!

2. Trials require cooperative obedience.

But there is an unmistakable imperative in verse 4—we must “let steadfastness have its full effect.” MacArthur writes, “The only way out of a trial is through it.”¹² And so through it we go in submissive obedience—or at least we must do so if we really want to know the full joy of maturity power-packed within the test.

The phrase “full effect” or “perfect work” even suggests the idea of proportion. As much as we fully surrender to the trial, God will fully impact us with it. Therefore, may humility accompany our joy and bring it to maturity during our trial!

ENDNOTES

¹ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 730.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 807.

³ Arndt, 793.

⁴ Ibid., 434.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Louw, 291.

⁷ Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty* (Colorado Springs: David C, Cook, 2010), 56.

⁸ Henry Frost, *Miraculous Healing: Why Does God Heal Some and Not Others?* (Hagerstown, MD: Christian Heritage, 2000), 36 quoted in Ibid., 55.

⁹ Arndt, 1039.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 995.

¹² John F. MacArthur Jr., *James*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), 32