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

INTRODUCTION

The Reality of Trials (v. 2)

1. *They are certain (“when”).*
2. *They are unpredictable (“meet”).*
3. *They are diverse (“various kinds”).*

The Nature of Trials (v. 2) — 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. Such is the nature of a trial—it is a test, a homework assignment, a worksheet, a spiritual project.

The Response to Trials (v. 2) — James says we ought to “count [our trials] all joy” (v. 2). This word “count” means “to engage in an intellectual process, to think.” Considering our trial intellectually (what James calls “counting it” here), we can write “joy” over it. Only the mind of the Christian has a firm foundation upon which to rest and a living fountain from which to continuously draw joy (Isaiah 12:3; cf. 26:3-4).

Throughout verses 2-12, James highlights four realities about trials that Christians “know” that will help our sanctified minds carefully consider our trials and enduringly “count” them “joy.”

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

1. **Trials produce spiritual maturity.**
 - a. *Endurance (“steadfastness”)*
 - b. *Completeness (“perfect”)*

c. *Singularity (“complete”)*

d. *Fullness (“lacking in nothing”)*

2. Trials require cooperative obedience.

TRIALS CAST US UPON THE LORD (vv. 5-8).

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

The duplication of the word “lack” in verse 5 demonstrates that James is now building on what he just wrote in verse 4. Having shared that trials mature us so that we are “lacking in nothing,” James now writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God...and it will be given him.”

The juxtaposition of this repeated word is meant to convey two connections between trials and wisdom:

- *Trials often reveal a “lack” of wisdom.* While trials are intended to mature and sustain us so that we are “lacking in nothing” (vv. 1-4), we are oftentimes lacking this vital quality for safely and joyfully navigating our trial (v. 5).
- *Trials provide an opportunity for us to be “given” wisdom.* That very quality is one of the attributes that trials provide an opportunity to grow in, so that we might indeed be “lacking in nothing.”

Being on a sports team does a similar thing. It both reveals a lack of athletic skill and training, and it provides an opportunity for us to be developed in those skills. That’s what a trial does. It shows us how we are lacking in the vital area of wisdom, and it provides us with the opportunity to ask for and be given it.

It is in the valley, when we have no where else to look, that we oftentimes finally look up. This is what the Psalmist expresses in Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord” (vv. 1-2a). In the valley, we discover that there are realities about life that we had misunderstood or missed altogether, and so we silence ourselves before the infinite and wise God for help.¹

So, better than the mountaintops of life, our trials cast us upon the Lord. And for that, we can count our trials joy! Let's ask and answer two questions about this benefit of trials.

1. Why should we depend upon God? (v. 5).

The lexicons define "wisdom" as "the capacity to understand and function accordingly."² This definition is helpful in that it shows that wisdom has to do both with thinking and living, both with knowledge and practice.

Wisdom is essentially "knowledge applied" or "skillful living". All of us have to live—some of us are better "livers" than others. More specifically, all of us face trials—some of us just face them better than others. The difference is wisdom.

a. *We need wisdom to successfully navigate our trials.*

Apart from the physical (e.g., sickness), material (e.g., stolen goods), or social (e.g., betrayed friendship) difficulties of trials, verse 2 hinted at the emotional difficulty of a trial and verses 13-18 will analyze the spiritual difficulty of a trial (i.e., it can tempt us into sin). Clearly, then, trials can be tremendously difficult tests, on many different levels.

Trials are the intersection of the natural, predictable rhythms of life (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1-11a) with unanticipated enigmas, baffling questions, and hurtful revisions (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11b, 14-15). Trials test our worldview (e.g., Why are we here? What is the purpose of all this? Will it end? Should I end it? Is there any hope?) and our theology (e.g., Is God good? Does He care? Is He in control?). They scrape our emotions raw, they drive us to reluctant decisions, and they leave us to question so many things that we had taken for granted.

And then come the answers, and both the sources and the answers themselves are all so very different. On one extreme is the counsel of Job's wife to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9); on the other end of the spectrum is the otherworldly response of Job who answers with a rhetorical question, "Shall we receive good from God,

and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10; 1:21). And then there is everything in between. There are the angry demands, the hollow platitudes, the stinging accusations, the well-meaning sentiments, the shallow explanations, the complex elucidations, and the customary well-wishes. And we are left to find truth and hope in the midst of all that mess.

Oh how we need wisdom (understanding, insight, skill) to navigate our trials! Many have been driven to anger and bitterness by their trials, many have been consumed with despair and hopelessness, many have coped in self-destructive ways, many have hardened themselves, many have simply withdrawn, and many have abandoned all Christian moorings and now wander around in a kind of perpetual night.

This is where a failing grade on these tests can lead a person! How, then, can we be any different, for we are all so weak?! We must get wisdom!

Only wisdom—true knowledge, rightly applied—can enable us to skillfully navigate the storms of life. Only wisdom can teach us the right knowledge, the right truths that we need assurance of in our trials. And only wisdom can help us respond appropriately in light of those truths with a manner of life that rises above the trial, rather than succumbing to it.

- ***Wisdom establishes our thinking in trials (our perspective).***

Discussion: What truths, what nuggets of wisdom, do you and I need to dependently cling to in our trials in order to navigate them successfully?

At this point, it is helpful to contrast wisdom with "the power of positive thinking". "The power of positive thinking" is often the default strategy of the general populace. It counsels that if you keep a positive lookout, everything will be okay—as Annie puts it, "The sun will come out tomorrow."

This “power of positive thinking”, however, is merely a shadow of the much fuller, richer, and more lasting power of “wisdom from God”. They share similarities, but they differ primarily in extent.

Pop psychiatry affirms what the Bible has long declared, that your outlook, your perspective, your worldview in your trial will greatly determine how well you weather it. So, the world says, “Stay positive! Keep your head up!” And thus, both the world and biblical wisdom agree that the way you view your trial will affect how well you navigate it.

However, “the power of positive thinking” can only sustain an individual so long. When one’s prospects continue to diminish, when the prognosis continues to worsen, when the pressure continues to mount, when the end looks more terrifying than the trial itself, when the sun doesn’t come up tomorrow—there, positive thinking is robbed of its power.

But, as we already saw in verse 2-4, God-given wisdom has the capacity to endure, even through the valley of deep darkness (cf. Psalm 23) into the unknowns unto death. God-given wisdom doesn’t know the limits of positive thinking; rather, it provides the resources of truth to undergird us even when everything is negative. Faith-filled wisdom from God courageously forges ahead even when the sun doesn’t come up.

Let me illustrate with a personal example. On Christmas Eve 2015, my mom was diagnosed with a glioblastoma, a cancerous tumor in her brain. As I have personally wrestled with this situation, I’ve wondered if I should pray for a miracle or expect the curse. In other words, believing that God is the sovereign, omnipotent

King who can do wonders, should I pray for Him to supernaturally heal my mom? Or, knowing from the Bible that this world is cursed and that life-taking cancers are a part of that curse, should I expect what science and experience records and stoically brace myself for a given end?

The answer of God’s wisdom is that I can do both, trusting God for His will, which is best, to be done. The Bible tells me that through Christ I can boldly go before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) and cast my cares upon Him (1 Peter 5:7). In the Scriptures, I read of a God who can heal (James 5:14-15) and extend life (Isaiah 38:5), and I discover that God loves to give good things to His children when they ask (Matthew 7:11). So, I can pray, believingly but submissively asking God to heal mom. And if He does, I will rejoice and thank Him!

However, God may not answer my prayer request with the miracle that I have in mind, but that does not mean He didn’t provide a miracle. Because God’s wisdom also assures me that the miracle happened two-thousand years ago when Jesus rose from the dead to conquer its power. Mom (and my whole family) is trusting confidently in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to remove the penalty of her sin and grace her with an eternity in heaven (John 3:16). Therefore, we no longer fear the brokenness of life and or its end in death—life has purpose and death brings us to Jesus (Philippians 1:20-26)! And so we confidently claim God’s promise that “many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Psalm 34:19)! Perhaps God will use medicine, but if not, then through death into glory, God will deliver my mom. And when he does, I will rejoice and thank Him!³

Such is the robust and relevant nature of the wisdom of God (cf. Romans 11:33-36). It provides real answers to real questions, offers meaningful counsel in difficult confusion, and anchors the soul in the midst of the storms.

What real and right joy is this, then, that our trials provide a unique context in which we can cast ourselves upon the Lord to learn deep and abiding wisdom that will equip us to skillfully navigate the purposeful tests of life!

- ***Wisdom establishes our responses in trials (our practice).***

A trial inevitably provokes a response from us, and it is that response that provides factual evidence to show how we really are handling it. After all, anyone can say, “I’m fine. I’m doing okay.” But how that person is really doing will be revealed in their ongoing practical way of life. And the wisdom of God offers resources to apply its knowledge to our everyday responses and practice.

This practical aspect of wisdom is what James has in mind when he returns to the topic of wisdom in James 3:13-18. There James writes, “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” Clearly, James sees a very practical, tangible, active aspect to the “wisdom from above”.

According to this passage, wisdom teaches us first and foremost to be “meek”, which is “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, considerateness.”⁴ This is a very necessary quality for a tested person to practice, because trials often cause us to be consumed with ourselves. We can then withdraw from people, use people, or disregard people (cf. v. 14, 16). These are not skillful and peaceful ways of enduring a test (cf. v. 18), but rather contribute to more chaos.

God’s wisdom is further characterized by purity, peace, gentleness, reasonableness, mercy, good fruits, impartiality, sincerity, and a host of other fruits of the Spirit (v. 17). In other words, God’s wisdom produces “a harvest of righteousness” even in trials (v. 18). It helps us avoid the deceptive and corrupting temptation of trials (vv. 14-16) and instead respond with active righteousness. And since we can be really weak in this area, allowing our trials to excuse pragmatism and selfish indulgence, we need God’s wisdom to flesh out these right responses through us during the difficulties of trials. And these righteous responses are both pleasing to God and blessed by God.

At this point, you may be asking, “How? How can I respond with this kind of wisdom in my trials when I don’t feel like it?” The answer to that is to “run to Christ”. After all, “in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30). So, run to Christ when “chased by fear”, “torn by grief”, “worn by life”, “vexed by hell”, “stalked by sin”, and “plagued by shame”.⁵

What happens when we fail to ask God for wisdom to establish our thinking and our practice in our trial? We will end up wasting our trial or wasting away in our trial. Remember, the purpose of a trial is to be a test to authenticate and strengthen and display the quality of your faith by producing endurance, completeness, singularity, and fullness. And wisdom is the assembly line along which those qualities progress toward maturity.

So, “if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God.” And that brings us to the second part of our answer to the question, “Why should we depend upon God?” On the one hand, we need wisdom; and on the other hand, God gives wisdom!

b. God gives wisdom generously and willingly.

The believer can “ask” God for wisdom, because He knows that only God has wisdom to give and that God will indeed give it. The word “ask” is defined as “to ask for, with a claim on receipt of an answer.”⁶ So, the invitation of James is to come boldly and confidently with our desperate request for God to give us wisdom in our trials (cf. Hebrews 4:16). And since that request is His will for us, we know that He’ll answer it (cf. 1 John 5:14-15)!

The text further encourages us to come assuredly before God in this request for wisdom by telling us about God’s character. Verse 5 literally reads, “Let him ask the giving to all willingly and without reviling God.”

This phrase first reveals that God gives wisdom generously. The word “give” (used 2x of God in v. 5) means “to give as an expression of generosity.”⁷ It is used in Matthew 19:21 of giving to the poor, in Matthew 7:11 of fathers giving to their children good things (and the heavenly Father giving to us good things), and in Matthew 14:7 of Herod promising to give whatever Herodias’ daughter asked. Furthermore, it is used by Jesus Himself in Acts 20:35 when He affirms that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” Our Savior would not command generosity of us, unless He Himself were also generous in His giving. God gives wisdom generously.

Secondly, verse 5 reveals that God gives wisdom willingly. The word underlying the ESV’s translation “generously” is used only in this verse in the New Testament, and an associated adjective is used only a few additional times. Translations are similar with slight variations: “generously”, “liberally”, “openly”, “willingly”, “wholeheartedly”, “sincerely”. James clarifies by adding that God gives “without reproach”. This word means “to find fault in a way that demeans the other, revile.”⁸ So, James is encouraging us to ask God for wisdom by assuring us that God won’t find fault with our request. Even though the request is an admission of

“lacking” something important, God doesn’t rebuke, revile, or mock us for needing it; rather, He willingly loves to meet the need.

So, we should depend on God for wisdom, not only because we desperately need wisdom, but also because God generously and willingly gives wisdom! Friend, keep asking Him for wisdom in your trial, because He is ready to give you wisdom. It is a delight for Him to give you wisdom. And it is a gift that in one sense He has already given.

God’s wisdom is given through His Word and His Son, and He has already given us those gifts. So, in asking for wisdom, we are asking for something that He has already joyfully given us. So, be in your Bible to learn the wisdom of God that provides mental “knowledge and understanding” and offers practical guidance for “every good path” (Proverbs 2:1-12a). And study the person of Jesus Christ, whose “mind” (Philippians 2:5) and ways perfectly lived out the very wisdom of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30)

We can count our trials joy, because better than the mountaintops, the valleys cast us upon God—and that’s a good and joyful thing! We’ve asked and answered one question of this text so far. Why should we depend upon God in our trials? Because we need wisdom, and God has wisdom to give us. Now a second question: how should we depend upon God? This text indicates that there is both a right and a wrong way, a way of asking and depending that is answered and a way that is not.

2. How should we depend upon God? (vv. 6-8).

While verse 5 is a wonderful promise for the context of trials, it is also given only to those who “ask in faith” (v. 6). For the one who does not ask in faith, “that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (v. 7). To help us understand what a faith-filled prayer for wisdom is, James highlights in verses 6-8 what it is not.

a. Faith does not doubt.

The very idea of “faith” is a trust, a dependence, a confidence in the object of one’s faith. One commentator writes,

Although there is nothing in God that prevents him from giving wisdom to his people, a barrier may exist in them. When they ask, they “must believe and not doubt.” Their faith must be more than mere acceptance of a creed. To believe is to be confident that God will give what is requested; it is to expect him to do so.⁹

The author of Hebrews agrees with James, writing, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Real faith genuinely and confidently rests in God’s character, purpose, and promises—and on that basis, it asks for wisdom.

b. Faith is not double-minded.

People characterized by “doubt” about God’s character, purpose, and promises reflect that in “double-minded” behavior in their trial.

The words “doubt” in verse 6 and “double-minded” in verse 8 are basically synonymous, referring to a man who is split or divided or wavering between two options. One commentator further explains how to mark this double-minded characteristic this way, “The Greek *dipsychos* in strictest literalness means ‘double souled.’ It is as though one soul declares, ‘I believe,’ and the other in turn shouts, ‘I don’t!’”¹⁰ This calls to mind the famous story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. After the failure of the false prophets to move their god to action, Elijah asks the double-minded Israelites, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him” (v. 21).

The joyfully enduring Christian has made up his mind to follow the Lord his God, and the trials of life don’t change that. He believes that God is who He says He is, that His purposes are what He says they are, and that His promises are true—and with Job, He doesn’t believe that a trial changes any of that. He is not double-minded—committed in the sunlight, cowardly in the darkness—but rather he is devoted to God in his test. To that individual, God gives wisdom.

c. Faith is not distressed.

The final characteristic of what faith is not is a result of the first two. Those who doubt and are therefore double-minded will become distressed. This individual is pictured in verse 6 “like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” and in verse 8 as “unstable in all his ways.” Unconditional faith in God is the anchor such a person desperately needs and will find nowhere else. And until he does, He won’t have wisdom for his trial either.

Now, lest we misunderstand James to be speaking hereabout the quantity of our faith while he is really addressing its quality, let’s turn our attention to two other passages.

First, in Mark 9:20-29 we are introduced to a father who is distressed about his demon-possessed son. He perhaps appears doubtful and double-minded when he says to Jesus in verse 22, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus responds with a gentle rebuke, “If you can’t! All things are possible for one who believes” (v. 23). The next verse is instructive for us: “Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (v. 24). This father was struggling with his faith, but he was not vacillating between belief and unbelief. Rather, he asserts his faith, while acknowledging his difficulty and inadequacy. He was not back-and-forth, but was rather firmly looking forward, albeit weakly. “In spite of his conscious weakness, the father had set his heart to believe.”¹¹ And for that faith-filled individual, Jesus answers His request.

Second, in Matthew 14:22-33 we see an amazing sight—Peter walking on water with Jesus. He has accepted Jesus’ invitation to embrace the storm and go to Jesus (v. 29), and now he is actually walking on the water. But he soon takes His eyes off Jesus and begins to analyze the storm. As a result, his heart is full of fear (v. 30) and doubt (v. 31), and he begins to sink (v. 30). But, even though his faith is “little” (v. 31), he still turns to Jesus with a simple and earnest plea, “Lord, save me” (v. 30). And Jesus saves him (v. 31). When he doubted, he sank; when he trusted, he was saved. Our faith doesn’t have to be great, but it does have to be centered on the right person—Jesus, the Son of God (v. 33). When our faith is singularly clinging to Jesus, He will meet our needs and grant us wisdom in our storm.

Trials can indeed be joy-producing occasions because they cast us upon the Lord. They force us to exclusively look to and depend upon our God, the only One who can sustain us with wisdom through the trials. So, we affirm with the psalmist that our trial is good and even joyful, for “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1-2).

ENDNOTES

¹ This is what the Psalmist exemplifies when confused by His trial in Psalm 73.

² Arndt, 934. Also Louw, 383.

³ My sisters mined their own wisdom from God through His Word and shared it with others in their Facebook journals. Rebekah recently posted,

Psalm 27:13 declares “I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” I am convinced of God's goodness 1) because Scripture declares God's goodness, as in Psalm 119:68 which states “Thou art good and doest good; teach me thy statutes” and 2) because I've witnessed God's goodness evidenced over and over and over again in the lives of my physical family and in the lives of my spiritual family (the church). “How great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast STORED UP for those who fear Thee, which Thou hast wrought for those who take refuge in Thee, before the sons of men!” (Psalm 31:19). #wefaintnot #Godisalwaysgood #convincedofGodsgoodness

Jennifer adds,

After we all got the news today, Mum sent us the verse that she had claimed for this year. Psalm 65:11 “You crown the year with your goodness.” God has been very good to us the last 2 months—the outpouring of support from people across the world, specific prayers being answered, a clear diagnosis, how God moved all of us stateside family members closer in the months leading up to this diagnosis, a simply wonderful Thanksgiving together, etc. God walks this path with us, and we need not fear the darkness and rough terrain ahead. ... The verse the Lord gave me today was Psalm 62:1-2, “My soul waits in silence for God only; From Him is my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken.” Love the promise and the stability of that last phrase.

⁴ Arndt, 861.

⁵ Words by Chris Anderson, music by Greg Habegger, “I Run to Christ” (churchworksmmedia.com, 2010).

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Ibid., 242.

⁸ Ibid., 710.

⁹ Donald W. Burdick, “James,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 169.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.