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Pastor Keith Lewis

Lesson 2 — *Real Faith: Real Faith Endures in Trials (1:1-12), Parts 3-4*

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 out 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).

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

- a. *We need wisdom to successfully navigate our trial.*
 - *Wisdom establishes our thinking in trials (our perspective).*
 - *Wisdom establishes our responses in trials (our practice).*
- b. *God gives wisdom generously and willingly.*

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

- a. *Faith does not doubt.*
- b. *Faith is not double-minded.*
- c. *Faith is not distressed.*

TRIALS REMIND US OF OUR SPIRITUAL POSITION (vv. 9-11).

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

For some, verses 9-11 seem to indicate a change of focus and an introduction of a new topic. However, such a view seems to stem from an unengaged or surface-level reading. A second look convinces us that James is continuing his discourse on the testing of trials. Consider these connections to the larger section.

- While the word for “boast”, meaning “to exult or glory”, is different than the word “joy” in verse 2, it indicates that in principle we are back to James’ overarching exhortation of how to respond in our trials.

- Verse 12 seems to be the summary statement of this section, and it repeats three words used back in verse 2-3: “steadfast”, “trial”, and “stood the test” (“testing” in v. 3). Verses 2 and 12, then, form fitting bookends to this entire section, including verses 9-11.
- Verses 9-11 may simply be understood illustratively. In other words, James is now selecting one of the “various kinds” of trials (v. 2)—namely, poverty versus wealth—and showing how God’s “wisdom” (vv. 5-8) can cultivate endurance and joy even in those tests.

A further difficulty in this text is the question of whether James is addressing two Christians here or one believer (“the lowly brother”) and one non-believer (“the rich”). While both views are valid, we’ll follow the first interpretation (that both “the lowly brother” and “the rich” are Christian individuals) for two reasons.

- Grammatically, both “the lowly” and “the rich” are singular, masculine, nominative adjectives. “The lowly” is clearly a modifier of the word “brother”, and syntactically, “the rich” appears to be a parallel modifier. Furthermore, the text obviously assumes the second usage of the verb “boast” in verse 10. It seems likely that it assumes the second usage of the noun “brother”, too.
- While the Old Testament often associates wealth with wickedness, James uses this same word later to describe a believer who is “rich in faith” (2:5). Furthermore, while James 4:13-17 and 5:1-6 indeed condemn the abuses of wealth, those sections are written to James’ audience of scattered Jewish believers (1:1-2).

In this section, James is building on his first two reasons for thoughtfully and correctly counting our trials joy. And he is doing so by using an illustration of a specific kind of trial—financial poverty versus material prosperity, the “lowly brother” versus “the rich”.

This is a particularly well-chosen illustration because it underscores both the complexity of tests and the sufficiency of God’s wisdom. According to the world’s thinking, the poor are indeed suffering affliction while the rich have managed to escape the test. But that is not entirely accurate. Wealth is not the absence of testing, but is rather testing of a different

(and often more insidious) kind. This is where that broader translation of “testing” helps us. While not suffering a trial as visibly as the poor, the rich are indeed tested (i.e., “tempted” as in verses 13-15). So, we see in this illustration the complexity of life’s tests—external and internal, situational and attitudinal, general and customized, obvious and subtle.

Furthermore, the world is not equipped to offer any wisdom for the rich man’s test. It merely looks on the “outward appearance” (1 Samuel 16:7) and so discerns the rich man to be okay and only offers input to the clearly suffering poor man. But God’s wisdom has something to offer to the rich man in the subtle and unseen tests of his wealth. God’s liberally-given wisdom is sufficient to sustain the believer in all the “various kinds” of tests—whether they’re more obvious (like the trial of poverty) or more subtle (like the temptations of wealth).

This wisdom, however, sounds strange. Rather than counseling the “lowly” to despise his poverty, James admonishes him to “boast in his exaltation.” And instead of permitting the “rich” to glory in his wealth, James tells him to rejoice “in his humiliation.” What an abnormal, countercultural perspective God’s wisdom wants to provide in the complexities of our tests!

Fundamentally, James is making the point here that trials uniquely force us to break our gaze from earthly distinctions and temporal blessings and turn our attention to the ultimate reality—our eternally secured spiritual position and riches in Christ.¹ Unlike the calm times of life, trials force us to look in one direction only—up, beyond the here and now to the hereafter, above the sun to the Son. And for that good adjustment we can count our trials joy.

That both the “lowly” and the “rich” are called to “boast” (or glory or rejoice) in this text points to two opposite contexts in which we should “set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-4).

1. In suffering, you should rejoice in your spiritual position (v. 9).

James commands, “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.” Scripture uses this word “lowly” or “poor” to describe the one who is needy in any sense: physically, socially, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. It pictures one who is destitute and low, very low. James uses this word “lowly” here to reflect a financial neediness, contrasted with “the rich”.

Clearly, then, this lowly person is in the middle of an obvious trial, and yet even there he possesses an “exaltation”—a real, privileged position, “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [him]” (1 Peter 1:4), for which he can rejoice (cf. 1 Peter 1:6). Scripture suggests at least three aspects of this spiritual position that all believers share.

a. Salvation by Christ

His position “in Christ” is beautifully described in Ephesians 2:1-7.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

James himself later describes this “exaltation” this way in James 2:5, “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?”

You may have been brought low, very low, by your trial, and the world might see you as anything but exalted. But, dear Christian, in Christ you have been fully and finally positioned in heavenly places. You are saved, delivered, rescued, redeemed—that is your unchanging position now.

b. Similarity to Christ

In Acts 5:41 the lowly Christians are “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name [Jesus].” With this in mind, Paul writes in Philippians 1:29, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” And in Romans 8:16-17, Paul affirms that we have been given the very Spirit of God to assure us that we are God’s children, “and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (cf. 1 John 3:1-3). What a privilege to be like our Lord in suffering and sonship!

c. Security in Christ

In Hebrews 10:34, we are introduced to Christians who “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property.” How could they have such a response in the midst of a terrible trial? It is because they “knew that [they themselves] had a better possession and an abiding one.” In other words, even when trials take things away, the real believer knows that the “good stuff” is never touched!

This is exactly what Paul modeled when he affirmed in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” Like the shields system on a Star Wars spaceship, our union to Christ guarantees that while we might be attacked, we won’t be destroyed; while we might be shaken, we won’t be confounded; while we might be tested, we won’t be broken. Therefore, you can count your trial joy because it highlights the contrast of your spiritual position, which is undeniably safe and secure (cf. Romans 8:31-39).

MacArthur summarizes the joyful exaltation of “the lowly brother” this way.

He may be considered “the scum of the world, the dregs of all things” (1 Cor. 4:13) in the eyes of the world, but in God’s eyes he is exalted. He may be hungry, but he has the bread of life. He may be thirsty, but he has the water of life. He may be poor, but he has eternal riches. He may be cast aside by men, but he has been eternally received by God. He may have no home on earth, but he has a glorious abode in heaven.”²

2. In safety, you should rejoice in your spiritual position (vv. 10-11).

“The rich” Christian in verse 10 represents the one who visibly does not appear to be in a trial, but is likely facing a test nonetheless. The stability of wealth (or more generally, the safety of not being in a concentrated trial) can lull us into a wrongly complacent or contented faith that may manifest itself in a variety of sinful ways.

- We may become self-sufficient and arrogant in our serene situation. As the songwriter wrote, “Sometimes when life seems gentle and blessings flood my way, I turn my gaze away from You and soon forget to pray.”³
- We may deceive ourselves (v. 16) into thinking that since we’re in a time of prosperity and calmness, life is great. In reality, however, even the best of times on earth pales in comparison with the fullness of what God wants to give us. A “rich” life may be a deluded life that has not been exercised to know the abundance of life that Jesus alone can give (John 10:10; Philippians 3:10) even in earthly poverty. Your best life is not now (contra Joel Olsteen), but the absence of trials may fool us into thinking it is.
- We may unduly focus on the temporal, and therefore lose it all (vv. 10-11), instead of living for the eternal and safely investing there even in our poverty (Matthew 6:19-21).

So, regarding this “rich” Christian, who seems to be safe and trial-free but who may be in spiritual danger, James writes that he should “boast”, not in his physical security, but “in his

humiliation.” That humiliation is then described in verses 10-11 as his certain decline and death. According to the Bible, that imminent “humiliation” should focus our attention on at least three spiritual realities.

a. The passing of life

The financially secure individual is reminded that his prosperity is temporary and that both it and he will one day, like the grass and flower, “pass away”, “wither”, “fall”, “perish”, and “fade away”. Most likely, difficulty will come and begin to snatch away his wealth “in the midst of his pursuits” (v. 11). But even if he can maintain it until his dying breath, that very breath will take it all away.

We need to recognize that in this life, safety is a myth. In this world, security is a mirage. In a Westernized, industrialized, technologized society, we may trick ourselves into thinking that we have mastered a comfortable level of control and predictability. But in reality, trials are the stuff of life, and they will certainly descend upon our short existence.

In his book, *Risk is Right*, John Piper writes about this very suppressed admission and seeks to turn the attention of the safe individual to his/her “humiliation”. He writes,

Ignorance and uncertainty about tomorrow is our native air. All of our plans for tomorrow’s activities can be shattered by a thousand unknowns whether we stay at home under the covers or ride the freeways. One of my aims is to explode the myth of safety and to somehow deliver you from the enchantment of security. Because it’s a mirage. It doesn’t exist. Every direction you turn, there are unknowns and things beyond your control.⁴

What is he saying? He’s echoing James, that the rich person (or any safe and secure individual) should not boast in his exaltation, his serene calmness, his controlled environment, his expensive security. Rather, he should acknowledge his humiliation, his frailty, his

insecurity, his ignorance. Yes, James says, he should “boast” in his “humiliation”, for unlike our exaltation, it is our humiliation that reminds us to hold the things of this life loosely, for they are passing away.

b. The provision of grace

Since my mom’s diagnosis of cancer, she has gone from healthy and active to increasingly weary and worn. Whereas she was previously on no medications, she is now on almost a dozen different prescriptions, all of them wracking her body with inter-conflicting discomfiting side effects. Each night she wonders how she will feel the next day, each morning she wonders what the day will hold, and each evening she wonders how well she will sleep. The financial impact is a real but secondary issue. The weeks are filled with an ever-changing and ever-growing list of various doctor’s appointments. And most primary, of course, are the concerns about the effect of the treatment on her vision, stability, cognition, general health, and longevity. Dad is walking this journey with mom, every moment of their day. And, unlike us kids who are still somewhat removed from the daily burden of this diagnosis, mom and dad wake up thinking about cancer, go through their day thinking about cancer, and go to bed thinking about cancer. Their testimony through this journey has been that trials humble us.

Yes, indeed, trials can strip us naked and kick out all our crutches from underneath us. Trials can take away all our comforts and leave us feeling lost and alone. Trials can cast us down to rock bottom and leave us sprawling there on our back. And there in that very low place that only a trial can bring us to, we discover the beauty of trials—that is, when submitted to, the humiliation of a trial is adorned with God’s grace for the trial.

Later in this letter James writes, “Therefore [the Scripture] says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. ...

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:6-7a, 10). Those who are tested by trials are inevitably humbled, and those who are humble receive God’s grace!

In life’s safety and stillness, we might be tempted to trust in and exalt ourselves, and that proud perspective is resisted by God. Thus, we must instead remind ourselves of the blessed “humiliation” that makes us worthy candidates of the grace of God (cf. Luke 7:1-10). It was the humiliation of an awakened awareness of our sin and of a faith-filled repentance from our wickedness that was met with the gracious redemption of Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-10). And it is the ongoing humiliation of recognizing our weakness, frailness, sinfulness, and dependence that is blessed with the continuing grace of God (2 Corinthians 12:9a). In our trials, we don’t need to be strong. Instead, we can embrace our humiliation, for when we are weak, He is strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10b).

The jewel of grace is mined in the valley of humiliation (Psalm 23:4-6). And so, the rich and safe individual doesn’t glory in the trial-free mountaintop, but rejoices in the low spot, for he knows the bounty that may be found there by God’s grace.

*Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see Thee in the
heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold Thy
glory.*

*Let me learn by paradox that
the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,*

*that the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest
wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter Thy stars
shine.*

*Let me find
Thy light in my darkness,
Thy life in my death,
Thy joy in my sorrow,
Thy grace in my sin,
Thy riches in my poverty,
Thy glory in my valley.⁵*

c. The promise of glory

The previous points bring us naturally to this one. When we embrace the perplexities of the passing of life, we'll be embracing the certainties of an approaching eternity. When we enjoy God's grace in the lowness of life, we'll experience its exaltation to glory. The passing of life points to the promise of glory, and the provision of grace is a teaser of it.

Throughout His Word, God promises to eventually make the correct spiritual adjustments that life fails to. In life there will always be inequality—the rich over the poor, the powerful over the weak, the proud over the strong, the secured over the suffering. God will one day flip the script so that “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12; cf. Luke 14:11; 18:14; James 4:7a, 10; 1 Peter 5:6). For this reason, we are counseled to “boast” in our “humiliation”, in the fact that we have been identified with the One who was “despised and rejected” by the world (Isaiah 53:3; John 1:10-11), so that we might be in a position to know His eventual exaltation (Philippians 2:5-11).

2 Corinthians 4:16-17 provide an excellent commentary on this tension between humiliation and exaltation. Verse 16 says, “So we do not lose heart. Though our

outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” While trials may humiliate and weaken our outer selves, they cannot rob our souls of the renewal that God is accomplishing even now (cf. Romans 8:28-30). Verse 17 extends that renewal into the future, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (cf. Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:20-21). This verse makes two important contributions to our understanding of the relationship between humiliation and exaltation.

- First, the labeling of your trial as a “light momentary affliction” is not meant to downplay or trivialize the significance of what you are going through. Instead, it is meant to emphasize Paul's point that affliction will be swallowed up in a greater glory (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:54b-55)!

To illustrate, consider a contented seven-year-old boy who loves his neighborhood, has great friends in his school, and is growing in his church. One evening, the boy's father informs him that his company has just transferred him across the country and that in two weeks they will be moving away from everything the boy has ever known. That move is terribly traumatic for this little boy, and he may wonder how he could ever move on from that.

Fast forward fifteen years. The boy is now a graduate student, he has a well-earned diploma on his wall, his network of friends and associates has vastly expanded, and he has a job already lined up after he graduates. Do you think the sting of that traumatic experience that he felt so piercingly as a seven-year-old boy is still keeping him awake at night and making him feel alone and afraid? No, not any longer. By comparison, the “glory” of his present situation has made the past “affliction” a distant and faded memory.

Similarly, we may see how even the worst of situations that we are facing may indeed be labeled, from the perspective of a far greater and eternal glory, a “light momentary affliction”. Christian, this is the benefit of Christ. For those outside of Him, the trials of life are not light and momentary, but will instead give way to the weightier and eternal terror of judgment. In Christ, however, our perspective is renewed, and we are confident that there will be a day in which we will compare our situation then with now and truly conclude our earthly trials to have been “light momentary affliction”, a faded and distant memory swallowed up by the indescribable joy of eternal glory.

- Second, we don’t have to wait until then to have this perspective in our trials. Unlike the seven-year-old boy, we can have it now. Paul uses a choice verb to help us see that even now, our affliction is helping to give us this perspective. The verb “preparing” means “to effect or work or bring about.” In other words, Paul saw that his trial (his affliction) was now working for him. Piper explains, “Affliction raised his sword to cut off the head of Paul’s faith. But instead the hand of faith snatched the arm of affliction and forced it to cut off part of Paul’s worldliness.”⁶

If you will accept the passing of life, if you will humble yourself to know the provision of grace, then you can even now confidently enjoy the promised hope of glory. Instead of killing you, your trial can kill all those distractions that diminish the joyful hope of glory and make it seem less than desirable in your eyes. Instead of robbing you, your trial can plunder from your heart those idols that would keep it from “press[ing] on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

In the contrast of temporal pain, eternity’s pleasures become more precious. So, allow your trial to purge you from earthiness, worldliness, distractions, idolatry, weights, and sins. Let your tests work for you to refocus you on what awaits you after your afflictions—the promise of glory!

The financially secure Christian (in this example) knows that a humbling trial may be right around the corner, but rather than responding despondently, he is freed to rejoice in the “eternal weight of glory” that everlastingly replaces all his trials and can never be taken away from him! Time may steal our security and comfort and launch us into a trial of affliction, but time will also eventually erase our humiliations and losses and usher us into the presence of our glorious God for all eternity.

What spiritual riches in Christ have you lost sight of in your focus on your circumstances? Whether you are in a trial, coming out of a trial, waiting for a trial, or going into a trial—you can count it all joy, because whatever it takes, however it lowers you, and however long it keep you, Jesus has secured your spiritual position.

TRIALS ENABLE THE OBTAINING OF DIVINE REWARD (v. 12).

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

In a previous point we demonstrated that this verse is directly related to the preceding verses on the tests of trials, rather than to the following verses on the testing of temptation. Verse 12 repeats three words found in verses 2-3 (“trials”, “testing”, and “steadfastness”), and the word “blessing” hearkens back to “joy” in verse 2. Clearly, then, this verse forms a bookend to this section on trials.

This wonderful summary verse provides a fourth truth to consider in order that we might count our trials joy. That truth is this: if we “stand the test” of our trials and are proven, having “remained steadfast” with a joyful perspective, then God will reward us. According to verse 12, this reward has three features to it.

1. Endurance is rewarded with blessing.

James calls the enduring man, “blessed”. Even the secular Greeks differentiated “blessing” from “happiness”, describing it as “the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care, labor and death.”⁷

Its biblical meaning might be defined this way: “possessing the favor of God, that state of being marked by fullness from God.”⁸

In His beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus bookended His pronouncement of blessing by stating “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3-10). Those who are “blessed” by God have His kingdom in their heart and so are no longer governed by the circumstances of their earthly life, but by the security of their heavenly position. As we saw in verses 9-11, their trial reminds them of that position, and thus they are loosed from the cares of this world, they set their mind on things above, they remember their citizenship in heaven, they rejoice in the sovereignty of God, and they embrace His blessing in their trial. Blessed “is the one who is in the world yet independent of the world. His satisfaction comes from God and not from favorable circumstances.”⁹

Dear Christian, if you apply the truth of verses 2-4, 5-8, and 9-11 in your trial, you can know the blessed joy of living above your trial, rather than the burdensome despair of being crushed under it. If you “hear” these words of the Lord and “do” them, then you will have a life safely built upon a rock, even when the rain and flood and wind assail (Matthew 7:24-28). You can be blessed *in* your trial. This is the reward of God on the real faith of the enduring Christian.

2. Endurance is rewarded with life.

Verse 12 literally reads, “Blessed is the man who endures testing, because having been proved, he will receive the crown of life, which [God] promised.” The phrase “having been proved” refers “to the process of testing and also to the consequent approval of the tested object as genuine.”¹⁰ James echoes the unanimous voice of the biblical writers by affirming that real faith perseveres, and so the one who endures the tests of life will have evidenced a genuine God-given faith.

Consequently, he will be approved by God and given “the crown of life.” This image is taken from the realm of athletics, not royalty. It represents the laurel wreath that was placed on the victor’s head after his triumph in some athletic sport (like the Olympic games, cf. 1 Corinthians 9:25).

There are two acceptable interpretations of this crown. Some view it literally as a physical crown that will be rewarded to the enduring believer and subsequently cast at the feet of Jesus (cf. Romans 4:10-11). Others view it figuratively to depict the glory and honor God will bestow upon the individual (cf. Esther 8:15; Psalm 21:3), namely the reward of eternal life.

The parallel in James 2:5 encourages us to take the second view. There James says that “those who love” the Lord have been “promised” the inheritance of God’s “kingdom”. Elsewhere, those who “love” the Lord and “keep the faith” are promised the “crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:7-8; cf. 1 Timothy 6:12) and the “crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4). Revelation 2:10 also references this “crown of life” in the context of perseverance: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” This crown of life, then, might be translated “the crown that is life.”¹¹ To those who persevere, God promises the reward of a completed salvation—full redemption, total righteousness, unfading glory, eternal life.

While perseverance may bring physical death, it will also obtain eternal life. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 10:34-39 (cf. 16:24-25) when He spoke of losing one’s (physical) life for His sake, and thus finding it (spiritually and eternally). Alec Motyer comments,

*Those who are prepared to use this life as an arena of endurance for Jesus’ sake will find that an abundant life awaits them from the hand of God. In this world, the onlooker might see them as sacrificing life, as having a wretched time, as ‘missing out on life’. They might be asked why they bother, why they do not opt out and enjoy themselves for a bit, and so on. But they have chosen to endure for Christ, and to live with their eyes on the life which he will give, crowning them with dignity, victory, happiness and reward in heaven.*¹²

In his first epistle, Peter agrees with James and 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*. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, *obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls*” (1 Peter 1:6-9, italics added for emphasis).

Knowing the reward that God has promised to us, then, let us never relinquish our confident trust in God. Instead, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23; cf. 1 Peter 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; Hebrews 6:9-20). By God’s power, let us persevere in faith so that we might inherit our full salvation (1 Peter 1:4-5) and hear our Master say unto us, “Well done, good and faithful servant. ... Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

3. **Endurance is rewarded with God.**

This reward is discovered in the last phrase of verse 12, where those who “remain steadfast under trial” are described as “those who love [God].” To understand the significance of this description and the fullness of the implied reward, let’s make three observations about the relationship between love for God and perseverance.

a. Perseverance evidences love for God.

Verses 2-12a are the fruit of verse 12b. In other words, the joyful enduring of trials is the product of a heart of love for God.

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that true and tangible love for God is one of the purest evidences of genuine faith (cf. 1 John 4:8, 16; 1 Corinthians 16:22). Indeed, a biblical definition of a genuine believer is a person who truly loves God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:34-38).

The New Testament also plainly demonstrates that one of the clearest proofs of true love is its character of perseverance. For example, true love for God remains in a close relationship to Him, which is what John speaks of in 1 John 4:16: “God is love, and whoever abides in love *abides* in God, and God abides in him” (italics added for emphasis). Additionally, genuine love for God perseveres in obedience, as 1 John 5:3 says: “This is the love of God, that we *keep* His commandments” (italics added for emphasis; cf. John 14:15; 15:9-10; 1 John 2:5-6). Furthermore, real love for God endures suffering, as Peter writes: “various trials” are endured “*through faith*” in God, for “though you have not seen him, you love him” (1 Peter 1:5, 7-8). The Christian who enduringly counts his trial joy gives indisputable evidence to himself and others that his love for God is not mere words, but an active reality.

Ian and Larissa Murphy met in college in 2005, dated for ten months, and loved every minute of it. Ian started ring shopping, and the young romance seemed to be speedily progressing towards marriage. That is, until Ian suffered a traumatic brain injury in an accident and became disabled for life. This severe trial tested both Ian and Larissa, but they committed themselves to the sovereign goodness of God and to His plan in their suffering. Several years later, at great personal sacrifice, Larissa married Ian, and their story is shared in a powerfully challenging video that is a blessing to watch.¹³

This couple’s endurance stands in marked contrast to the self-centered infidelity of the world. On one level, their perseverance proves their genuine love for each other. On an even deeper level, their enduring faithfulness is a testimony to their love for God. At the end of the video, Larissa asks Ian, “What about God enables you to have a happy marriage?” In his now disabled and distorted voice, Ian immediately responds, “He’s awesome.” Their video ends with a line from a hymn, “When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.” Like God’s love for them (Romans 5:8), their deep love for

each other and for their Lord has been tangibly evidenced by their loyal perseverance.

Do you love God? Do not thoughtlessly answer, “Yes.” James is more interested in what your life says than your lips. If you are a “fair-weather” friend of God or a “band-wagon” Christian, then you betray the same shallow quality of love for God as you do for your sports team. God deserves a depth of love that is evidenced in loyal, committed, undeterred perseverance.

b. *Love for God empowers perseverance.*

In a cyclical manner, perseverance evidences love for God, and love for God empowers perseverance. This is why only a Christian is equipped to triumph over his tests, because at the heart of his faith is not a code of conduct, but love for a Person. In the crucible, a code can be compromised, but passion for a person is merely purified.

Spirit-produced (Romans 5:5), gospel-driven (1 John 4:9-10, 19), faith-filled (1 John 4:16-18) love for God (in other words, more than just a professed passion) is deeper than any test and enables a perseverance that outlasts every test. It won't be dissuaded or discouraged, damaged or destroyed. It has made up its mind that God is its treasure and “prize” (Philippians 3:7-9). And so testing not only doesn't deter it, but instead becomes an opportunity to enjoy a depth of intimacy with God that can only be known through the endurance of affliction. This is what Paul refers to in his zeal to know “the fellowship of [Christ's] suffering” (Philippians 3:10-11).

So, do you love God? If you love comfort, a trial that makes you vulnerable will likely destroy you. If you idolize a person, a trial that attacks that individual will terribly embitter you. If you are passionate about your career, a test that hinders your work will frustrate and discourage you. But if you love God, there is no test that can change Him or take Him away from you (Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 13:5-6). Instead they all make Him

more precious (Psalm 61:2). Like Abraham who “feared” God and therefore steadfastly followed Him into the heart-wrenching and confusing test of sacrificing his own son (Genesis 22:12; Hebrews 11:17-19), only love for God can empower perseverance in your test.

c. *Persevering love will enjoy God.*

And now we come to the particular point of reward that James is highlighting by this description of the enduring Christian as a person who “loves” God. In love for the God he cannot see (1 Peter 1:8; 1 John 3:1-3), the man or woman of real faith perseveres, clinging to Christ and hoping in the Lord. And throughout the test but especially at the final end of his testing, he will receive that for which he longs—God Himself.

The Christian who loves his God may admit that his heart and his flesh fail (Psalm 73:26a), but he will quickly affirm, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25). And so, through his trial and into “glory,” He is rewarded with nothing less than God Himself, “the strength of [his] heart and [his] portion forever” (Psalm 73:26b). What the believer loves and longs for, He will receive entirely and eternally! He will be satisfied *with* God!

Therefore, we conclude that in light of the rich rewards that God gives to His persevering people, we may count our trials joy.

CONCLUSION

Trials may be the stuff of life, and they may be painfully difficult—but for the Christian, they are also an appropriate occasion for joy. Unlike the serene mountaintops of life, valleys mature our faith, cast us upon the Lord, remind us of our spiritual position, and enable us to obtain divine reward. These gospel-given truths (and many more) may really and rightly be “counted” in the mind the believer, producing this sum: joy!

ENDNOTES

¹ “He exhorts each of them to look toward their spiritual identity as the measure of their ultimate significance. To the poor believer, tempted to feel insignificant and powerless because the world judges a person on the basis of money and status, James says: take pride in your exalted status in the spiritual realm as one seated in the heavenlies with Jesus Christ himself. To the rich believer, tempted to think too much of himself because the world holds him in high esteem, James says: take pride not in your money or in your social position—things that are doomed all too soon to fade away forever—but, paradoxically, in your humble status as a person who identifies with one who was ‘despised and rejected’ by the world. The point of the passage is, then, that Christians must always evaluate themselves by spiritual and not material standards” (Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000], 68–69.).

² MacArthur, 39.

³ Words and music by Ron Hamilton, “Lord, I Need You” (Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, 1988).

⁴ John Piper, *Risk is Right* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), pp. 19-20.

⁵ “The Valley of Vision” in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, ed. by Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).

⁶ Piper., p. 50.

⁷ Burdick, 171.

⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Burdick, 171. BDAG defines this word as “pert. to being genuine on the basis of testing, *approved (by test), tried and true, genuine*” and thus “pert. to being considered worthy of high regard, *respected, esteemed*” (Arndt, 256).

¹¹ Understanding this crown to refer to the life that God has promised to us does not deny individual rewards that Christians will receive, for those are addressed in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 4:5. Instead, it just questions the typical understanding of actual crowns that will be received. Additionally, it is still very likely that we will cast our rewards back to the Lord in eternal worship, service, and enjoyment. That is an appropriate response modeled for us by the 24 elders in Romans 4:10-11.

¹² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 49.

¹³ John Piper, “The Story of Ian & Larissa,” at desiringgod.org (2016), www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-story-of-ian-larissa.