
James – Exposing the Heart of Division in the Church

James 1:1-27 Joy and Wisdom in Trials

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Introduction On October 9, 2007 the Dow Jones Industrial Average hit an all-time high of 14,164.53.

In our business we are typically paid an asset management fee based on the value of the money we manage. Our income tends to track loosely with the U.S. equity markets relative to the risk designed in an investor's portfolio. In other words, if an investor has 50% stock, you might expect that person's investment portfolio to drop only half of that of the U.S. equity markets. The other 50% would be made up of conservative investments such as bonds and in theory would insulate the portfolio from market volatility. Our income therefore is not an exact correlation but it is one way we can have a sense of what our income is going to be each quarter.

In October '07, we were 6 months in our new office, and our staff was as big as it had ever been in the history of the firm. Unfortunately, because of the move, and a high tax rate on cash reserves in a corporation, our reserves were also as low as they had been in a number of years.

We knew, intuitively, that it was only a matter of time before the Market had a correction and began to drop in value. This is a normal cycle in our business and one we have worked through regularly in the history of our firm. Little did anyone know that this time the causes and underlying problems would cause the worst economic and market decline in 50 years.

By Sep. 30, 2008, almost one year later, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had fallen to 10,850.66, a 20% drop from the market high a year earlier. We had been dealing with the slowly declining Market over the previous year, and we began to reduce our budget almost monthly to cut back on our expenses. Even at this time we decided we had to reduce our staff by one employee. Every day, there was new news concerning disingenuous business practices in the large financial companies and many were bailed out by the government almost on a daily basis. The government became increasingly involved in taking extreme measures to prop up some of the oldest and most conservative financial institutions in the United States. Eight business days later the DOW shed another 20% down to 8,451.19.

In one year we had lost close to 40% of our income to the firm. I personally had to cut my income by over 60% to help balance the budget, and everything in the business had to be cut to the bare minimums in order to survive. This was also a very difficult time for my wife, who tends to be much more conservative than I and is our company bookkeeper. She also was dealing with a shrinking budget at home, so at

times it was a very difficult balancing act. It reminded me of the time early in our marriage when Heidi was the household bookkeeper, and I was teaching at a Christian School at that time. One day Heidi handed me the checkbook and said “here, I can’t handle having bills to pay and not having any money in the checkbook to pay them with”. I became the household bookkeeper after that for many years, but more recently, Heidi had been managing the household expenses once again.

Because stress was high, and our office and household budget had been cut to the bare minimums, a vacation earlier planned to be “away”, became a “stay”cation. Staying at home would help us save money and to do some much needed cleanup that we had not been able to get to since the fall “hurricane”.

Thursday, November 13, 2008 at roughly 11:00 am, I greeted my wife the first morning of our “stay”cation. Our family was looking forward to time off work and school together because we could at least stay up late and sleep in the next day, and this is what Heidi did! That morning I had to complete some work at home on the computer, which is what happens when you own your own business - you are always available for work, even on vacation. And, mishandling my 30 minute trial, I was complaining... because I had to work on work!

Heidi looked tired, and the night before she had a sore throat and was concerned with spending the long weekend wiped out and sick...little did she know...

I asked Heidi a question concerning work, and that is when everything we had planned for that weekend changed. Heidi could not answer my question, and I thought perhaps her throat hurt, but she literally could not answer my question. I asked her to write the answer, and it didn’t take long to see she was not able to put three letters together in a single word. A frightened look came over her face and tears came down her cheek. I prayed with her, and called my physician who is a personal friend. He answered...which he isn’t always able to do...I knew it was neurological, but nothing else. He directed me to the emergency at Sycamore, and the rest as we say was history.

Heidi suffered a full stroke, and was in the hospital for 5 days. As you know, my wife is fit, we have always eaten healthy, and she had no family history of heart disease or stroke. They ran every test on her they could think of because she absolutely did not fit the normal stroke patient profile. She would not be able to drive again until January 2009, almost 7 weeks later.

Heidi arrived home from the hospital on November 18. On November 20th the Dow Jones hit a new recent low of 7,552.29, a drop of close to 50% from its high mark a little over a year prior. Since October 2007, and Heidi’s stroke, doctors are still not 100% sure what caused Heidi’s stroke. In March of this year, the DOW tested a 12 year low, dropping to 6,547.04, well over a 50% decrease from the Market high, and the U.S. has done very little to secure a good solid recovery.

In God's sovereignty, I was preparing to preach this series on the book of James in January. James was a constant companion during my most recent time of testing. You are getting James 6 months later, but the research and meditation I had done up to that point was vital in helping me get through (and continue to get through) my time of testing.

James' audience faced their own specific set of difficult circumstances and James certainly addresses those specific trials, but more informing in the book of James are the heart-exposing issues surrounding those trials. The specific trials in James are informative to us today, but so are the heart issues complicit in those trials.

Let's pray...

Greeting (1:1)

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

The James pinpoints his audience as the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion".

"The readers are *the twelve tribes scattered among the nations*. The phrase *the twelve tribes* probably does not mean that the readers were all Jews, but that James thought of them as the people of God, the true Israel, whether they were Jews or Gentiles (so also Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9). The readers are scattered just as the Jews were scattered during the exile, which probably indicates that the readers were not living in the Holy Land. There is, however, another use of 'scattered'. 1 Pet. 1:1 uses the same term to indicate that since becoming Christians his Gentile readers were no longer at home in their native countries; their real home was heaven."¹

One important consideration as we consider the book of James is where James fits into the historical canonical timeline. James is considered by most scholars to be the very first book written in our New Testament. James was written somewhere between 44-49 AD, around the time of the first church counsel in Jerusalem and Paul's first missionary journey. This knowledge helps us as readers today understand and shape the historical context in which the letter to the churches was written. James has always been recognized for its closeness to and inclusion of Jesus' most memorable teachings. Many Scholars suggest that James could have quite possibly edited a collection of sermons that he used regularly to preach and teach (probably locally in Jerusalem), and now there was a need to take the message to the larger audience of those believers dispersed beyond the local community. We only have to look at Acts to see James' strong leadership in the early church and his vital leadership in the administration and emphasis of unity in the early church. It is with this in mind that we consider the content in James as addressed to dispersed believers.

¹D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jas 1:1.

While there a number of theories on structure and outline of the book of James, I have chosen to adopt largely for this sermon series, the outline from D.A. Carson's edited commentary, *New Bible Commentary*, partially because of its understanding of first Century Greek letter structure, and the Old Testament interpretation influences and recognition of the researchers.

Joy and Wisdom in Trials

“The Christians James was addressing were facing *trials of many kinds*. These trials were not severe persecution (and certainly not illness, for which different terms are used), but rather low-level persecution such as social rejection and economic boycotts. This was happening simply because they were Christians. Although the trials were painful, James calls the believers to rejoice, not because the pain is pleasant but because they should have a perspective which looks beyond the present life to eternal reward. The *pure joy* is not a present happiness, but joy in anticipation of God's future.”²

Let's read together beginning at verse 2:

Count it all Joy (1:2-4)

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.

The various trials that the church was undergoing during the time of James are not unlike what we might experience in the church here in America one day in the future. The pressures that the church was experiencing can very easily be mapped over a potential and likely scenario for us here in the USA. Many of us could experience such financial and sociological pressures as we live our lives closer and closer to the Lord's return. This is one of the reasons that I find the book of James so intriguing. We know from Acts and other epistles that very early church persecution was not necessarily life-threatening, but it caused severe stress in the church none-the-less.

James doesn't waste any time getting to his main point in the very beginning of the book. Count it all joy...when (not if) you face trials. What kinds of trials? Trials of many kinds; so while I believe there is very real relevance to the particular trials that are located in James, the principles that James exhorts his readers to recognize and follow are applicable to all of the trials that we face day to day.

The very first command from James is Joy! Joy in our trials...I have been reading and meditating on James over the last year and all too often Joy eludes me! I may have peace, courage, even thanksgiving and confidence that the Lord is working his

²D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: *The New Bible Commentary*. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jas 1:2.

will through my trials, but joy? Please take a minute and consider whether you are joyful in your trials.

Why joy? Because we should rejoice that the testing of our faith makes us strong, steadfast and mature. I suspect many of you (like myself), in the midst of your trials, desire comfort and relief from the pain. I remember clearly sitting in the car in the hospital parking lot one cold snowy afternoon...as Heidi lay in the hospital and I did not what to expect, and I didn't want to go down the unknown path where God had placed me. The path I was on was not designed by me, but I was left with no other path, and no other choice of routes was really available. The unknown choices were difficult, the dark storm clouds of uncertainty fought to obscure my decisions. I didn't want to go through this test, but there was only one way out, and that was to go through the trial. As Devon helped me see that afternoon...there is only one way through a trial, and that is out the other side. I prayed for joy, but I knew I could not be steadfast without God's grace.

The fruit of a test well handled with joy and perseverance results in a life one step closer to being fully complete and fully mature, which will only be completely realized when we see Jesus face to face. Until that time we need to remain steadfast and joyful in every trial in which we find ourselves, because we will face tests and trials of various kinds, overseen by our Lord to help us grow steadfast and mature, to become more like Christ.

Prayer in the Midst of a Trial (1:5-8)

So, where do you first turn in your time of trial? Where is your first source of strength and support? Who do you leave in the wake of your sorrow, anger, or frustration during a time of testing? Are you completely dependent on yourself, your job, your wealth, your physical health and strength, your spouse, friends or family?

Where does James tell the church to turn? Let's read verses 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.

When we are cast on the open seas of a trial, where can we turn, where do we get wisdom? James says look only to God. We need to throw ourselves on our knees in utter dependence on God for (not only strength, comfort, and grace), but especially wisdom. Wisdom from God will help guide us through the maze of our testing and enable us to have the proper perspective as we go through our time of testing and tend to bump into the unopened doors of comfort and ease and clarity of direction.

The testing of your faith during a trial is also a test of your relationship with God. Is this a one-time stop for wisdom when you are in dire straits, or are you so sure of your ongoing relationship and dependence on God that your belief and faith in God is unwavering? I believe asking for wisdom from God tests our reliance and relationship with God, because those who do not truly believe that God is willing and

able to provide wisdom...will not receive wisdom. You will be left in a trial that shakes your faith, and with only your own wisdom to guide you.

I believe James, in relating to his mainly Jewish church body, has Abraham in mind as he considers reliance and faith in God, especially in the description of unwavering faith that God has a plan and that plan is far greater than our own understanding.

Consider a double-minded [man from the perspective of The New Bible Commentary: an...](#)

“Instead it is that of a person who is *double-minded*, a phrase with a close equivalent in the Psalms (Ps. 12:1–2), and which is the opposite of trusting God from one’s whole heart (Dt. 6:5; 8:3). In other words, this kind of a doubter is the person who is not wholly committed to God, but ‘plays safe’ by praying. Their real interest is in advancement in this world, but they also want to enjoy some of God’s blessings now and go to heaven when they die. Such a person will not get wisdom, James says. In fact, such a person will not receive anything at all from God.”³

Anatomy of a Trial (1:9-11)

In verses 9-11 we begin to get a sense of the specific trials that James is addressing. Let’s read beginning at verse 9:

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.

This first chapter of James is a summary of the rest of the letter. We begin to catch a glimpse of the anatomy of the trial (or aspects of the trial) that James is addressing. There are two classes of believers in the churches James is writing to. But unlike the natural order of things James turns the idea of rich and poor on its head. It is the lowly brother who is to boast in his position before the Lord, and the rich needs to be concerned, because even though his life is beautiful like a flower, the riches of a wealthy man will disappear in the midst of his worldly pursuits.

Don’t forget that there was no middle class in the early church, and the church was very young, and under severe political and fiscal stress. Many in the churches were being denied jobs and a way to earn a living because they were Christians. They were facing economic boycotts and social rejection. There was increasing stress and persecution on the church from outsiders, and increasing stress because of the varied social and economic standing inside the church.

³D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jas 1:5.

I want you to think about Clearcreek Chapel. Could this ever happen to us...to you? Are we unstained by economic stress and potential community polarization? Could severe economic stress disrupt the unity? What if persecution in our community affected some believers getting jobs to support their families? What if only some of us had incomes? Would giving decline? Would sacrificial giving cease? If we struggle to sacrifice now in comfortable economic conditions, how will we respond if a monetary and economic famine comes to the church in the future. How will we sacrifice for a brother or sister when our own family's existence depends on what little we have? These are hard questions to consider, but not ever outside the realm of possibilities.

What about disunity due to socio-economic status? Could this ever cause division in our church? Or, do you ever judge others because of what they wear or their perceived level of income, the kind of car that they drive, the schools their children attend, or the value of their home? Ideas like these are the same sin attitudes that James has to address throughout his letter.

Remaining Steadfast under Trial

James takes the opportunity to further elaborate on the themes and concerns he initially mentions in the first part of the letter, but now he adds another layer of clarity and structure to his concerns over what is taking place. Let's read verses 12-15:

Testing's Originations (1:12-15)

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. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

How is steadfast defined? **stead•fast**: firmly fixed in place : IMMOVABLE ;not subject to change; firm in belief, determination, or adherence

Consider again verse 2: ...when you meet trials of various kinds..."meet" in this context is an active verb, but may be more likely translated "fall into"...however there is also a sense of "meeting face to face" in the Greek. When we meet our trials of various kinds "face to face", we are to remain immovable and firmly fixed in place. Thus, in a trial we are the raw steel of a sword being fashioned and tempered with fire and a craftsman's tool. In our trials we are the sword being shaped and hammered between a mallet and anvil. This type of patience in the midst of pain requires that we stand strong, even as the sparks and ash fly upon each strike of the hammer against our lives. We must remain strong all the way through to the other side. For the only way to get through a trial is to stand firm and see it through until the end. Only when the shaping and refining are complete, will we be the finished product God desires.

Our reward for this perseverance and steadfastness is a crown of life. Experiencing a trial should force us to focus not on the outcome in this life, but how it is influencing our godliness for eternity. Trials are a tool in God's hand that allows us to become spiritually mature and a better tempered tool for his use. Joy should come from an eternal focus that searches and reaches beyond our present difficulty.

Even though, in God's sovereignty, trials are for our maturity and completeness, we should never think that that our temptations are come directly from God's hand. Look again at verse 13. *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.* But, we are tested (tempted, or tried...thus trial... in the Greek), when we give in to our own desires! This was a huge revelation to me in helping me understand temptation, and I believe as we explore further we will see that trials, and temptations, and testing can be all interconnected. In fact *...each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin leads to death. Are then all trials tied to sin...? Are we the producer of our trials through sin?

You will see as we move through James that understanding desire and sin is a key to understanding the sin and trials being addressed in this letter. Seeing how we may contribute to our own sin (and therefore trials) can help us turn and find joy in the midst of our trials. God uses testing and trials for our benefit, but God is not the direct cause of our trials, even in his sovereignty over them. In God's sovereignty, he will use our own sin and the sin of others to grow us in maturity and perseverance. And in the middle of our testing, it is wrong to blame our temptations on God, because he cannot be tempted and does not tempt anyone.

What is God's Role? (1:16-18)

Let's continue with verse 16:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Do not be deceived... How easy it is for us to blame shift, or be tempted to blame shift when we are caught in the middle of a trial caused by sin, or when have been caught in sin itself. I dare say, even if we are in a trial where we are being sinned against, and this all in God's sovereign plan for our lives, we often fail to take any personal responsibility. And worse, who are we tempted to point to and blame...God himself. It can be an overwhelming temptation to blame God for our trying circumstances even when everything he does for us, yes even our trials, are for our good and maturity?

James reminds his ~~listeners, that~~ listeners that yes, even in the midst of being sinned against, and in the middle of our temptations and desire to ~~sin, sin:~~ sin, sin: every good and perfect gift is from above, from God himself. How can we complain knowing that

through his unchanging character and word, we are like the very first and best of creatures?

Remember that this is a young and dispersed (primarily Jewish) group of believers. So the idea of the first fruits may have denoted giving the choicest tithe or offering to God.

Perhaps the primarily Jewish believers would have thought back once again to Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Now, the early church through economic persecution and isolation is being allowed to be offered back to God through their trial as an offering. Did God hate Abraham or Isaac because of his actions? Was God punishing Abraham? Have you ever considered what Abraham's desires were for his son? He was commended for his love and faithfulness to God, in his lack of hesitation and his willingness to offer his only son back to God. Abraham was single-minded in knowing that God would provide a sufficient sacrifice.

Abraham would have been a clear example of one who remained steadfast all through his life under trial, and would have been an excellent point of reference as one who remained faithful and righteous.

Faith Requires Action: (1:19-27)

The early church that James is writing to would have recognized that Abraham was a clear example of true faith, but does faith require action? James argues that true faith requires (or perhaps a better word is...causes) action! We know the church is experiencing economic and sociological pressure that is beginning to show itself inside the church. We saw earlier in chapter one that there is division in the church largely along economic and social lines. There are two classes of people, rich and poor. and in the midst of tough economic stress, some that have money and power both in and outside the church, and those who do not have sufficient resources. We will see this more clearly in the next chapter, but we also know from this introduction that this division is a true trial the church is going through; one that requires joy and wisdom, steadfastness and maturity, and will produce a reward that will be a crown of life, if endured with righteousness and maturity.

I believe as we move on we can begin to see some of the heart issues exposed and solutions considered in the concluding section of James' summary.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

The people involved in this struggle are to find their way through this trial with wisdom from God's written word, and they are to take action with their faith. They are to be quick to listen to one another (and quick to listen to God's word) and slow to become angry. Anger is an issue in the desires of the people James is addressing, and this will become clearer later in the letter.

We can see here two very different economic classes of people, Both are believers in the church and are fighting and angry at the situation and stresses they are being

put under. Instead of being joyful, steadfast, and wise they are indeed doing the opposite. These actions will not produce the righteousness that God expects from the church.

These actions are considered by James as filthy wickedness, and are to put out of the life of a believer. The wisdom and grace necessary to complete such an action comes from the implanted word of God, which is able to save souls, and provide Godly wisdom and grace for their trial. God's word is supposed to be received with meekness...the complete opposite of their heart desires and subsequent actions toward one another.

Let's read beginning at verse 22:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

It is not enough to merely hear the word...but action is required. Action is the result of true faith and understanding of God's word. Here we see that God's word is sufficient for their trial, or the sin caused by feeding their sinful heart desire. But just sitting in church day in and day out having the word implanted was not enough, there has to be evidence of life change. And yet, there was division and anger, and a lack of listening to, preferring, and caring for one another, as they pursued their own desires.

How often do we sit here Sunday after Sunday, or even read God's word consistently on our own and in the end it has all been a hollow intellectual pursuit? James tells the church that if this is so, we are deceiving ourselves, and are like men and women who look at ourselves in a mirror and immediately walk away and forget what we look like.

But the help through the trial is to fully hear God's word and DO what it says. We need to fully "gaze" into the perfect word of God, and intently and purposefully meditate on God's word so that we will be able to persevere, bless others, and receive a blessing ourselves. This was quite a contrast to what was going on in the churches to whom James was writing.

In fact, those James was writing to thought they were religious! They perhaps considered themselves mature and wise already. But James correctly explains that there has to be mature action in response to true faith.

First, the listeners were exhorted to bridle their tongues. Clearly this was not happening. As the heart goes, so goes the tongue. Some believed, perhaps because of their knowledge or standing in the church that they were in fact, religious, that their

outward religious practices were enough to be acceptable to God. I believe that James is initially targeting teachers, or even elders in the church, and others with visible power in the church.

Religion that does not control the tongue is worthless, plain and simple. Outward piety is no substitute for true heart change provided through the wisdom of God's word. Pressure in trials is not an excuse for division, anger, and ungodly speech.

True religion is keeping oneself from being stained by the world and providing for those in affliction. It is evident from this chapter alone that the church was not caring for its own community. There is clear evidence, even in this initial summary phase of James that many of those involved in this trial could not say that they were "unstained" by the world. They may have been pious, leaders in the church, they may have been teachers of orthodoxy, but their faith was only about words, and not actions of love such as caring for the less fortunate. Those most affected by the economic and social persecution were in fact not being cared for, but being mistreated even at the hands of more fortunate fellow believers, and perhaps even teachers and leaders.

Conclusion

Are you joyful when you face trials of many kinds? Have you even considered what true joy and worship looks like as a reflection of your own life in the midst of trials, temptation, and sin?

Where do you turn in times of difficulty and testing? Is unwavering faith in God that he alone will provide wisdom through his word your first call for help?

Recognize the danger of heart desires gone astray. Pray for wisdom from God to help you see how your heart desires may be leading to sin and testing, especially as it relates to others.

Recognize that every good gift in our lives is from above, and God is sovereign over our trials.

Be doers of the word and not just listeners in our trials, especially as it involves loving and reaching out in our community to those who have needs

True outward expression of faith involves caring for those in our community who have needs. It is a love of the world and our own comfort that merely focuses on ourselves, even if our teaching is sound

Finally, recalling verse 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.⁴

⁴*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jas 1:12.

