

## James 1:1-18 - How do we view suffering?

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### Introduction

Today we begin a new sermon series looking at James letter written to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution. James comes to us with huge credibility. He was a major leader in the Jerusalem church and most commentators say he was Jesus' brother. Yet he humbly chooses not to portray himself in that way and instead opens his letter by describing himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. James offers an array of practical teaching calling Christians to work out their faith in the details of everyday life. It is a how-to book on Christian living containing confrontation, challenge, and a call to commitment and encourages us to become 'doers' of the word. James readers in hostile surroundings were experiencing suffering and being tempted away from true faith. This letter is a reminder that genuine faith transforms lives and must be put into action.

We begin by considering this tough question... "How do we view suffering?" It's a difficult subject to tackle and I pray what emerges will in God's strength help us better understand what it is to be a Christian and help us develop and grow as disciples of Jesus. So let's begin with a question: Have you ever experienced times where you found yourself saying "Why me"? "Why is this happening to me"? Verse 2 says "**whenever** you face trials" it doesn't say "if" you face trials. The fact is we all have and/or will experience suffering. As we work our way through this recognize it is likely to challenge us but I also pray it will leave us with some sense of peace in our hearts particularly if we are experiencing suffering at the moment. This sermon may not have all the answers but with God's grace James words will hopefully bring a Godly perspective to the way we view suffering in our lives.

To try and bring a sense of genuineness and authenticity to this let me briefly disclose a glimpse of my own suffering. I don't offer this to gain sympathy or to try and suggest I've suffered more or less than anyone else – it is just one form of suffering I just happened to have experienced. When I was seven my dad died and it was the most awful moment of my life. If I'm honest 46 years later it still hurts. But for the purposes of this sermon I simply offer this experience because it is a true picture of life. These things happen – just like cancer, persecution, losing your job, being involved in an accident, alcoholism, illness, relationship breakdown etc. etc. They come along and quite unwittingly fall into our lives. Sometimes (not always) we're not expecting it nor prepared for it. Any day, at any time of day, some experience of trial is lying in wait ready to leap on us and we cry out, 'What is this?', 'Why is it happening to me?' - Sometimes we say why is God doing this to me? I don't believe God creates suffering, for example he didn't make my Dad die. But God will take difficult situations and use them with our best interests at heart to mould us and bring us closer to Christian maturity.

Now today many of us quite rightly will be here with our own experiences of suffering and naturally we will have differing views of why certain things do or do not happen. I think it is also important to acknowledge that some people will suffer more than others and it is frustrating and beyond comprehension to understand why. I say all of this because it is important that as we look at this passage we recognize this is simply taking God's word and laying it across this question of 'How do we view suffering'. Some of it may not necessarily be what we want to hear while some of it hopefully will be but what is crucial is that we try to hold fast to what God is saying to us through scripture. Please do have your bibles open as we begin to study it.

So let's start to look at James' words. I've broken this down into four chunks...Suffering...

1. A stepping stone to perseverance
2. A stepping stone to maturity
3. A stepping stone to wisdom
4. A stepping stone to glory

### 1. A stepping stone to perseverance

Verse 2 begins: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Consider it 'joy' – how bizarre! What is James getting at? He is not asking us to adopt a sort of superficial happiness in the face of life's difficulties. James is being real – he faces the fact - life brings many trials and he offers a vital truth...In the trials of life our Christian faith is being tested for genuineness. In verse 3 James insists his readers should **know** the testings they are experiencing produce perseverance. The perseverance James speaks of in verse 3 & 4 can indeed be illustrated from life, but what he calls us to is consistent living for Christ. He is saying we will be less fluctuating in our loyalty, less erratic in our conduct by being tested through the trials of life.

God's doesn't make trials happen but he does allow us to be tested through them. Trials may come from outside, through circumstances or people, or, they may be the inner promptings of our sinful natures. But they are God's designed way forward. It is only by meeting and passing its tests that faith grows into strong consistency. But let's not pretend this is easy. When suffering strikes the road can be hard, long and unremitting: we may initially endure the beginning of an unexpected trial, and then face enduring again while it persists, and then have to go on enduring – it's difficult.

Hebrews 12:2 shows our ultimate example is Jesus who 'endured the cross' right through to the point where the whole work of salvation was accomplished, and he himself entered upon the unbroken possession of eternal glory at the Father's right hand. As Jesus' followers we are therefore called to a persistent endurance but like him we can also look forward to a glorious destination: verse 4 reveals the goal - that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Of course this can only be our complete experience when we see Jesus, and "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). For now within this lifetime our present target is to become more like Jesus and of course - the path is the same, namely, testings, endurance and perseverance. Which leads us to our second point...

### 2. Stepping stone to maturity

There is no trial, no great disaster, no overwhelming sorrow or indeed small incident outside the plan of God and therefore hard as it may seem at the time God can and will use these varied sufferings to mould us to maturity and ultimately completeness in Christ. Our trials are therefore like stepping stones to perseverance but also to maturity, wisdom and ultimately glory which is why James describes it as *pure joy*, not because it is joyful in itself but because 'later...it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace' (Hebrews 12:11). In James' words, it is the only way forward to truly become *mature and complete, not lacking anything*.

But you might now be saying, 'does the medicine have to be so nasty? Does the treatment have to be so severe? But James replies, 'Don't you want to be better?' So then, do we want to be like Jesus? Do we want to come to the full enjoyment of our full salvation? Do we want, when we reach heaven, to have our perceptions and faculties so sharpened and sensitized that we will be able to see the glory? Then there must be perseverance, maturity and wisdom in between - there is no other way.

1 Peter 4:12 says: **do not be surprised** when trials try us. This is a tough call but - if we are to really line ourselves up with scripture a whole revolution in thinking is called for that touches not only our appraisal of life's experiences, but also our spiritual expectations as well. We may seek

to become like Christ by thinking of holiness, blessings, perfection, victory over sin all coming as a result of some inner deal with God, a total commitment, a self-abandonment to him – and then we expect these benefits as instantaneous results, open to us now. You see conversion takes only a moment – transformation takes a lifetime.

James is real! James' road is uphill and tough; the benefits he promises are hard won, and progress painfully made can be consolidated only by repetition of the same costly effort. Put it another way - Scripture has spoken, and our duty (and privilege) is to reform our thinking in the light of God's word. James is saying – in suffering it is a great privilege, because this is the way our Saviour went forward to his glory. And if it is the way Jesus went, then his followers and servants are called to tread the same way? I guess the acid test is – do we know anything that our hearts want more than to be made like the Son of God in all things?

But – as an example – when my Dad dies I became so tied up in such a mass of confusion that everything seems like a huge pointless mess. There was nothing I could imagine in that situation even beginning to look like a 'stepping stone to maturity'. Alternatively we may accept our circumstances are designed by God to apply those pressures and impose those tests which, in due time will bear the fruit of increasing maturity. But we find that seeing life like that does not make it either easy or plain which way to turn and there is more than one path opening up. Prepared as we are to persevere, we don't know which to choose as the divinely appointed way forward.

### 3. A stepping stone to wisdom

James words in verse 5 help us. The key word is wisdom. James is saying the wise person will be able to see life as he has pictured it in verses 2-4 and be able to progress towards Godly maturity. But – for example my lovely wife will tell you that wisdom is not exactly part of my natural make up. So are people like me destined never to possess it? James would disagree! He teaches – wisdom is a gift from God and whoever lacks wisdom can ask for it. Just like that. James says God is such that he can afford to make large promises in his name, and to affirm that those promises will be honoured. God's nature is to give.

Think about it - when we come with our prayers, does God reply, 'Sorry come back tomorrow. Perhaps I will then be able to be 'the giving God' again, but today I must occupy myself with being something else'. God is more than 'giving', but he is always 'giving'. The 'giving God' gives – with a selfless, total concern for us and with an exclusive preoccupation as if he had nothing else to do but to give and give again. God is totally sincere and desires our progress to maturity and He will not withhold from us the wisdom we need. So why for example do I lack wisdom - verses 6-8 provide the answer as they raise the question of our sincerity.

Do we want to go forward with God? Are we whole-heartedly committed to his way of seeing things and his ambitions for our future? Or are we keeping a door open for the world? Are we trying to have a foot in each camp? God's mind is clear; but are we (v7) double-minded? Faith is our absolute confidence that he will give what we ask; doubting is our own inner uncertainty about whether we really want him to give or not. And we all have doubts and our faith does wobble. Even if we do acknowledge God as Father, Jesus as Saviour and the Holy Spirit as Comforter doesn't mean the pressures of the day disappear; we still find ourselves fraying at the edges in the changes and chances of life. When times are tough I know personally that sometimes for my own sake I have to ask myself some hard questions. On the one hand I can say: "My heart is right with God because that has been eternally secured for me by Christ" – and that is absolutely correct for all who follow Jesus. But is my heart one with God without any division of loyalty? Am I honestly living out my faithfulness to God in the place of prayer? Because James is saying that out of this will emerge wisdom which helps us hold on to a steady course in the storms of life.

In verses 9-18 James tough but real teaching continues saying we must learn to trust God and his word rather than be captured by the world. Verses 9-11 warns about being captured by

wealth, and verses 13-14 being captured by temptation. James is warning that these powerful impulses are deeply deceptive. In verse 10 he uses the analogy of wild flowers - here today, gone tomorrow, or even sooner if the sun is out. James urges his readers to look at the world inside out and upside down, as Jesus constantly taught. Don't allow your imagination to be drawn into the world's way. Instead ask God for wisdom and see things as God sees them.

#### **4. A stepping stone to glory**

In verse 13 & 14 James develops what he said about 'trials' and 'testing' in verse 2 & 3, warning us not to imagine that God is responsible for the temptation itself. The testing comes from within and the challenge is to take the 'self' we find within us, and to choose wisely which impulses and desires to follow, and which ones to resist. Otherwise as verse 15 says if we conceive the wrong desire it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death!

But if when trials and tribulations come we persevere and withstand the test then the contrast could hardly be sharper: In verse 12 God promises 'the crown of life', leading us in exactly the opposite direction. James grounds his teaching in what is true about God himself, with verse 17 reiterating God as the generous giver, the 'father of lights'. Everything that truly lights up the world is a gift from him; God's light is constant. When God speaks, things happen. Things happen to us. Things happen in us. The word of God is like medicine which goes deep down inside, healing our inner hurts and changing our inner motivations, so that we become different people.

In verse 18 - we are 'a kind of firstfruits of all he created'. You bring the 'first fruits', the beginning of the crop, as an offering to God, as a sign that there is much more to come and one day, God's word will transform the whole creation, filling heaven and earth with his rich, wonderful light and life. Our lives, transformed by the gospel, learning to look at the world differently, standing firm against temptation, are just the start of that larger project.

And to close look again at verse 12. We can look forward to "the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" - This is a sign of joy, a sign of royalty that no one can take away because we are adopted children of God, a sign of victory that in Christ we have overcome the evil one, and a sign of dignity and honour for we serve as God's ambassadors. For us to receive this crown, Jesus needed first to wear the crown of thorns. It is ours to look forward to, as we follow Him along the pathway of discipleship, facing many trials that test our faith that produces perseverance so we may become mature and complete, not lacking anything.

How are we to view suffering? A stepping stone to endurance, a stepping stone to maturity, a stepping stone to wisdom and a finally a stepping stone to glory. "Consider it pure joy".