

1. True Christian Faith: Overcomes Trials and Temptations

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Father, as we come to your word, we ask that you will strengthen us and encourage us and comfort us. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Just after the war in Russia, a Finnish alcoholic by the name of Philip was converted. He heard about the living God, he repented and put his trust in Christ.

And he began to use his time and his energies to help run the underground church in the part of Russia in which he lived. And his activities came to the attention of the authorities and he was arrested.

He spent some time in prison, surrounded by murderers, violent men, vicious criminals. He asked to have a Bible in prison.

His Bible had been taken away. They refused to return it and instead gave him a little packet of atheistic literature and advised him to read that instead. And while he was awaiting trial, he said this, I must say that I have never had such great joy in my heart, not even at my conversion, as when I was under judicial investigation and then in prison.

[1 : 24] The Bible tells us not to be fearful when they bring you before governors or magistrates. For God will give you the words and you will speak with wisdom. When I read that, I simply cannot express how from that moment God gave me such wisdom and strength that they could not stand before it.

Here was a Christian believer facing trial, quite literally, facing a trial. And he gives a testimony of great joy, of being given wisdom and of being strengthened by the living God.

Here is a portrait of a true believer with genuine faith. And it is a portrait which was held before us in chapter 1 of the letter to James, from James, excuse me.

In this letter, James is keen to emphasize the importance of genuine faith, of true religion, of an undivided devotion to God, in the face of false religion and self-deception.

And James presents us with a portrait throughout his letter of the perfect man. The man who stands firm under trial. The man who controls his tongue.

[2 : 40] The man who trusts God in all circumstances. The letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus. And it's addressed to the twelve tribes.

Chapter 1, verse 1, in the dispersion. That is Christian people throughout the Roman Empire. And it's almost like a sermon, actually. Some people think it is a sermon which has been written down. It's full of exhortation, rhetorical question, visual images. And it's a very practical letter, practical sermon. And it's a very realistic letter.

The people James is writing to are real people. And they have real problems. They are facing sickness. Some of them have financial worries.

Others are experiencing broken relationships within the church. Some of them are being persecuted. A real letter written to real people with real lives.

[3 : 40] And in his opening chapter, James writes to the believers to encourage them in the midst of these difficulties. He writes to encourage their hearts as they face trials and temptations.

To keep them going for Christ. And to encourage them to press on with him, whatever the cost. So we want to look at that first chapter tonight. And I want to break it approximately in half.

You'll notice in verse 2, James addresses the topic of trials of various kinds. The Greek word is periasmos. Periasmos. And then he explains the purpose, God's purpose in these trials.

And explains the Lord's provision for his people when they face difficulties. He then moves on in verse 13 to talk about temptations. And the Greek word is the same.

Periasmos. And he talks about God's will for his people in the midst of their temptations. And the provision God makes to help them through. We'll look, therefore, at these two sides of the coin. [4 : 44] External problems. Trials. Internal problems. Temptations. The first heading, therefore, is trials leading to perseverance and perfection.

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. If something is important in life, it's very important.

We test it to make sure it works. So my sister-in-law is a medical student. She's currently in Melbourne. The temperature is 40 degrees. That is 50 degrees higher than it was in Glasgow. But being a medical student is a hard life. And when they're not on elective overseas, they have many tests. And it's very important they do. Because a doctor has a tremendous responsibility. [5 : 45] All these powerful drugs. All these powerful procedures they can do. And they have to test them to see that they work correctly. That they're trustworthy. And for the Christian believer, faith is very important.

It is faith by which we come to believe in God. Faith by which we trust in Christ. And receive the forgiveness of our sins. And the gift of his Spirit. It is by faith and not by sight which we walk.

And so James is concerned that the Christians have true faith. Not just a front. But genuine faith. And he says the way you know is in the testing of your faith.

John Wesley was an 18th century evangelist. You likely heard of him. He travelled around England for 50 years. Preached 40,000 sermons. And saw a mighty revival.

But there was a time when his faith was not genuine faith at all. He was ordained into the Anglican Church. He was a very high churchman. He loved his bells and smells.

[6 : 48] And he had a little group of friends. And they would gather and they would pray and be very earnest with each other. And John Wesley and his brother decided to go off to America to preach to the locals. The natives.

And they did for some years. Then they came back. And as they returned. As John returned to England. They had an enormous storm. And the boat was battered by the wind and the waves. And his life was in peril.

And John realised in that situation that he had no peace. He had no assurance of his sins forgiven. He had no hope if that boat was to sink that he would be with the Lord in glory.

And he wrote this. When the young Wesley's faith was tested.

It was found to be no faith at all. Just a veneer of religion. And so when they landed safely in England. He sought about discovering what genuine Christian faith was. And then gave himself to preaching that among his countrymen.

[8 : 06] So how do we respond when we face trials of various kinds? How do you respond when you are in need? Do we get down on our knees? And do we pray to our Father in Heaven who feeds the birds of the air.

And clothes the lilies of the field. And ask him for the things we need? Or do we get bitter? Do we resent him? Do we take matters into our own hands?

And try and acquire things which he has not given for us? How do we cope when life isn't going quite as we would have it go? How do we deal with unemployment?

How do we cope when our relationships aren't what we want? Do we say I believe in a God who has a plan for me to give me hope and a future? Do I believe that in all things God works for the good of those who love him?

And do we trust into his care and his timing? Or do we turn aside and say I'd be better off if I was on my own? How do we cope in persecution?

[9 : 11] How do we cope when the conversation in the office turns to that of mocking Christians? Or when people put pressure on us because of our faith? Do we say with the Apostle Paul, I am not ashamed of the Gospel?

Because there is the good news and the power of salvation for all who believe. Or do we, like Peter, say I tell you the truth, I never knew him. Or do we deny our Lord and seek the praise of men rather than the praise of God?

How do we cope when we face terrible suffering and terrible grief? Do we say with Job, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

Do we confess that God's ways are higher than our ways, his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. And though we cannot explain them, we will continue to trust in him and in his goodness. Or do we become cynical and bitter and just walk away?

How do we cope when our faith is tested? Well, James says you'll know if it's genuine. But more than that, it is in the testing of your faith that it grows.

[10:20] It produces steadfastness, perseverance, endurance. Philip, again, once he was imprisoned for his evangelistic activities in Russia, was sent to a prison camp.

And when he was there, he wrote this. Though camp conditions were often difficult, it is precisely at such times that God is especially near.

I learned much and acquired great riches through these trials, sharing somewhat in the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, God has a different purpose for us than simply our comfort and ease. Verse 4, he desires that we be perfect as he is perfect. That we be complete, developed and mature in our Christian character.

And lacking in nothing. Sometimes it takes great difficulty to bring that change about. Sometimes we need to face tests for our endurance to be developed like a weightlifter lifting heavyweights.

[11:23] To be strengthened and to develop. John Piper writes this in one of his books. And his books, I should say, are very helpful on the whole question of suffering and the sovereignty of God.

What a tragic waste when people turn away from the Calvary road of suffering. All the riches of the glory of God are on that road. All the sweetest fellowship with Jesus is there.

All the treasures of assurance. All the ecstasies of joy. All the clearest sightings of eternity. All the most tender acts of forgiving kindness. All the deepest discoveries of God's word.

All the most earnest prayers. They are on the Calvary road where Jesus walks with his people. In God's mysterious providence, he is able to take curses and make them blessings.

He is able to shine the light into our deepest darkness. And to transform us and change us to be more like his son. To make us homesick for heaven. Paul puts it this way.

[12:30] We rejoice in our sufferings. Knowing that suffering produces endurance. And endurance produces character. And character produces hope.

Not masochists. But we understand that God is at work in our sufferings. And yet we are not left to our own devices.

The Lord is with his people. And he provides for them in their need. When I used to work in some hospitals around Glasgow, we do night shifts.

And night shifts are a very hard thing. I am sure many of you know that. It is dark. You are tired.

You are hungry. And invariably at night, all your colleagues disappear.

And you are left by yourself holding a bleep. And the phone is ringing. The bleep is bleeping. There is a queue of patients coming into casualty. Machines are breaking. People are sick. It is a really difficult place to be.

[13:26] And I did not enjoy my night shifts very much. But two things kept me going. The first thing was that you could call for help. Somewhere in Glasgow, there would be a consultant tucked up in bed, comfortable and warm.

But he had his mobile phone on. He or she would have a mobile phone. And if you got really stuck, you could swallow your pride. You could say goodbye to your reference. And you could phone the consultant and ask him a very simple question.

And James says, if you are stuck, ask God. One day you will lack nothing. But in the meantime, verse 5, 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.

If you ask God in faith, you will receive the wisdom you need. To face the difficulties. To chart a course through the choppy waters of life. And to stand up to those persecuting you.

[14:33] You think of Solomon. There he was, young man, just inherited a kingdom from his father. And God said, what would you like to help run this kingdom? And he said, I want wisdom. And God generously gave him wisdom.

Greater than any other king. So great that people would travel from other countries to come and hear it. Think of the words of Christ. When preparing his disciples for mission throughout the world.

He said to them, when facing persecution, I will give you a mouth and wisdom. Which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

If you need wisdom, ask God. And interestingly, Philip, in prison, would ask God for wisdom. And people would say, why are you here, Philip?

And he'd say, oh, I'm a great thief. And they said, that's interesting. What did you steal? He said, I used to steal people from the devil and give them to God. And that would create the opportunity where he could share with other prisoners in the camp.

[15 : 34] If you lack wisdom, ask God. But the second encouragement, I would have three in the morning. It's dark. You've just finished the takeaway. The bleep's still going.

There's even more patience. I would comfort myself, knowing that in a few hours, the sun would rise, the consultant would return, and he would sort out all the problems. And James says in 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. One day, says James, the trial will come to an end.

The Lord will return, bringing with him the crown of life he has promised, bringing with him the kingdom he has promised, and will bring you into that kingdom.

The old order will be done away with. The sun will rise. All things will be made new. Death, sorrow, sighing, fleeing away. And the tears will be wiped from your eyes.

[16 : 40] It gave me encouragement to know that the night shift would end and the day would break. And James says, stand steadfast under trial. It will end. The Lord will return and present you with your crown.

But of course, we face another battle, don't we? And having shown us how trials lead to perseverance and perfection, James now turns his attention to temptation.

And we're told that God will give a crown of life to those who love him. And yet so often it seems that we do not fully love God. Our hearts wander away after the latest fad or fashion.

We suffer from temptation, where we are tempted to turn away from the Lord and to follow our own desires. Having discussed trials, he then moves on to temptation.

And our second heading is, temptation is deadly, but the truth of God brings life. And we saw that James understands that God's will is for his people to face trials of many kinds.

[17 : 50] But when they face temptation, they're not to stand in the middle of it, but they are to flee it. They are not to stand and hope that it somehow develops perseverance. They are to turn away and leave the temptation behind.

Because we are by nature sinful. And we are prone to turn back to our old habits, our old desires, our old patterns of thought and behavior, which threaten to stunt our spiritual growth and undermine our faith.

You see, James is very realistic about the state of the human heart. In chapter 3, he, inspired apostle though he was, says we all stumble in many ways. We all need help.

We are all broken. And he reminds us, in contrast to that, of the goodness of God. That God cannot tempt, cannot be tempted with evil, verse 13.

And he himself tempts no one. Instead, he gives good gifts. Perfect gifts coming down from God, who does not change. So James says, you need to be honest about the state of your heart.

[18 : 55] But, you shouldn't blame God when you find yourself in difficult circumstances because of your own doing. We need to understand that we are sinful. And we have desires which would lead us away.

When somebody faces temptation, verse 13, let no one say, I am being tempted by God. That's what Adam said, wasn't it?

When he was guilty of sin, he said, This woman, which you put in the garden to be with me, she gave me of the fruit of the tree. Your fault, Lord. You put her here.

It's the attitude of the man in Proverbs 9, verse 13. When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord. James is saying, be honest about the state of your heart.

Do not be deceived. And do not blame God when you fall into temptation. And he tells us about the nature of temptation. It's very pernicious, isn't it?

[19 : 57] Verse 14. 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, gives birth to death.

You see, temptation is a gradual process. Somebody doesn't wake up in the morning and say, I don't think I'll go to work today. I'll rob a bank. Or I think I'll go and lie to all my colleagues.

Things begin small. It begins with a thought, a desire. And then it grows and develops until it is given birth to sin. And sin, of course, bringing forth death.

And James says, do not be deceived about the nature of temptation, but nip it in the bud. If you go to New York City, you'll find it's now a relatively clean and safe city.

It used to be terrible, full of violence and murder and drug dealing and robbery of tourists and so on. But now it's very safe. And you can walk around quite the thing at night and go into areas that were previously dangerous to go to.

[21 : 01] And the reason being, a former mayor, Rudy Giuliani, adopted what he called a zero tolerance policy. That is, he would punish people very severely for very small crimes.

And the theory was that they would not go on, therefore, to commit more serious crimes. People wondered a little bit about this theory, but it was shown to work. And in a few years, the murder rate fell, the crime rate fell, and New York became a safe and a clean place.

Zero tolerance for crime. And so we need to have zero tolerance for sin. Desire grows and gives birth to sin.

Sin gives birth to death. We need, therefore, to nip it in the bud. At the very earliest stages of desire. Not to let it fester and ferment in our minds. But to snuff it out at the earliest stages.

That's what Jesus meant in the Sermon of the Mount. When he said, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. We could say today, couldn't we?

[22 : 01] If your broadband causes you to sin, unplug the cable. If your free view causes you to sin, give the box back. If the bottle sitting on your cabinet shelf causes you to sin, pour it out.

If that relationship or that friendship causes you to sin, break it off. We have to have zero tolerance for sin. Because if we give it an inch, it will grow and develop and bring forth death.

But of course, God gives us provision. And he does not leave his people battling alone. Verse 17. God gives new life.

And James sets up a deliberate contrast. Sin is deceptive. It lies to us. It promises us something that it will not deliver. God gives us, verse 18, truth.

[23 : 12] The word of truth. His sure promise of life. Sin destroys. Desire gives birth to sin.

And sin brings forth death. And God gives life. Of his own will, verse 18. He brought us forth. Death. By the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits. The firstfruits, you'll recall from the Old Testament, were the offering given to God. They were the best of the crop and they were considered holy.

What was offered wholeheartedly to God. Sin will bring forth death. But the word of truth will bring forth firstfruits. Holiness.

Devotion to the Lord. Do not be deceived, my brothers. Listen to the word of truth. Do not let sin develop into death.

[24 : 08] But allow God to bring in you a kind of firstfruits. To develop his holiness. And to develop your devotion to him. Well, next week we hope to look more at this word of truth.

And our relationship to it as believers. But I want to leave that with you tonight. I'm sure as we go back this week, we will face many trials. Many temptations. External and internal battles of many kinds.

And when we do, let us heed the words of James. That the testing of our faith demonstrates the genuineness of its nature. That it strengthens it, producing steadfastness.

Driving us into the everlasting arms of God. Let us pray together. Let us not tolerate even a grain of sin to enter our lives. The little yeast which threatens to work through the whole batch.

Let us draw an ear to God. Asking him daily for cleansing and renewal and strengthening and encouragement. As we face the trials and temptations of life.

[25 : 11] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you that you give every good and perfect gift. We thank you, Lord, for new birth. For bringing us forth through the word of truth.

And we ask that as we go this week, Lord, we might walk in that newness of life. Strengthened, comforted and equipped by your spirit. To glorify you in all that we say and do. We ask, Lord, that you will give us wisdom.

In all the delicate and difficult situations we face. And we pray, Lord, that when we face trials. That we might be conscious of strengthening and perseverance.

Being developed in us through your spirit. We pray that you make the hope of glory very real to us. Help us to long for that crown of life. For that coming kingdom. And to live as subjects of that kingdom.

In our homes and in our offices. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[26 : 15] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.