

2. Steadfast under Trials

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 November 2013

Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 00] I'd be very grateful if you'd turn to our reading for this evening, which you'll find in James chapter 1, the letter of James chapter 1. I think that's page 1011 in the Blue Bibles.

James chapter 1.

A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings.

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 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.

[1 : 25] 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. 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. 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.

[2 : 26] Amen. And may God bless his word to us this evening. Amen. Well, do sit down, and I'd be very grateful if you turned to James and chapter 1, to that passage we read earlier on.

James chapter 1, verse 2. Now, what a surprise this introduction is. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

What a surprising way to start a letter. Not only because the words joy and trial do not normally sit that comfortably together in one's mind, but also because of what this letter was written for.

If you were here with us last week, you'll have learned that this is a letter almost certainly written to Christian people behaving badly towards one another.

To correct them. To bring them back from their bad behavior to single-minded service of God and love for one another. Some of the behavior described in this letter is quite disgraceful.

[3 : 35] It's a grittily realistic letter. Not at all naive. And you'd expect the start of a letter like this to be pretty firm. I've heard all about you lot.

Stop doing it right away. But that is not the way James starts. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various sorts.

It has a strangely positive note to it. Why does he start the letter this way? Now we're going to be going for the next few minutes to be looking at the detail of this section.

But I want you to keep that question floating around in the back of your mind. Why on earth does he start a letter like this one in this way?

Even when you look at the detail, it's unusual. Perplexing. I mean, who can count troubles or trials as a joy?

[4 : 39] Life, of course, is full of difficulty and trial. These are realities. We know these to be realities. But that note of joy is hard to understand.

I wonder if James is one of those super spiritual people who just pretends that everything is okay all the time, even when it's not. Is that the way to deal with people behaving badly? Oh, well, just be joyful anyway, even if you are killing one another.

Is he a dreamy, head-in-the-clouds kind of person? Well, no. He is just giving full weight to another big reality.

If difficulties, trials are a reality in life, James has another reality that he wants his readers to engage with. Something that the child of God has to give attention to.

Look at verse 12. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial. He starts in verse 2 with trials, and he ends his little introductory section in verse 12, coming back to the same theme.

[5 : 47] Trials at the beginning and the end. And once again, there's a strangely hopeful note in verse 12. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.

Why? For when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

James is a proper realist. Just as real as the various difficulties that life throws in our direction, just as real is the great future that God has promised to those who love him.

He starts and ends with trials. Trials will come your way in life, he says. But for the one who endures patiently, hoping in and loving God, a great crown of life awaits.

It's a reality. So this letter starts with two big realities of life. Trials, things that are a test to trust in God all the way through life, and a great crown of life at the end for the person who endures.

[7 : 04] Let me pause for a moment to reflect on those two realities. Christians are not immune to any of the hardships that might come anyone's way in this life.

Do you believe that, Christian? You are not immune from anything. Anything that can happen in this world might happen to you.

There will be many things in life that make you wonder if God is really there. If his love can really be counted on. Don't let it take you by surprise when such things happen.

Of course, at one level, they always surprise us. You fall suddenly unwell. It's a great surprise. You didn't expect it the day before. But what James is encouraging his readers here is that theologically they must not be surprised that any old thing might happen to them.

It doesn't mean that God isn't there. It doesn't mean that he doesn't care. And verse 12 is the ultimate expression of his care. God has promised that.

[8 : 23] And he can be thoroughly depended on. Now, friends, that ought to be the cause of genuine comfort and optimism for us. I remember, I think, that one of the most stressful moments I remember in life, it may just have been because I was relatively young, was my postgraduate medical exams.

I got out of my car at St. Helia Hospital, Carl Shulton, and I looked at the building, and I almost was physically sick. I remember thinking to myself, well, at least in three hours, it'll all be over one way or the other.

And I'll probably still be alive no matter how bad it is. That is a slightly hopeless way of dealing with difficulty. Well, at least in three hours, it'll be over. But God has promised not merely that in the end the difficulty will be over.

He's promised that it will be brilliant for those who endure trusting in him. A crown of life. A great reward.

Eternal life. So, said James, keep going. But notice that his encouragement is even more positive than that. Look at verse 2.

[9 : 44] 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.

It's not that bad things are good, says James, but the good God will use even the most difficult things for the ultimate good of his children. You see, every time in life that I face a difficulty, there is the possibility that I won't keep going.

That I won't trust the God who's made his promise. And I need to know that keeping going is worth it. One of the things that will keep me going is knowing that the end is worth it.

But James is telling us more than that here. He's saying that it'll be worth keeping going, not just because God is in control, and not just because he'll deliver in the end, but because he is actively using what happens now towards the end that he wants for us.

Now, that is an extraordinary idea. Whatever you are going through now, whatever you are going through now, persevere in it, says James, and somehow, mysteriously, in the end, that persevering will be used by God for our ultimate good.

[11 : 15] Now, can I say at this point that there is not a hint of sentimentality about the author here? Remember who the author is? The half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, an eyewitness of the sufferings of Jesus, an eyewitness of persecutions endured by Christians.

He is not wet behind the ears. He's not naive. I remember when I was a medical student, I spent some time in what was then Zaire, what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

I met a person there while I was there who was a dentist. He was originally from Uganda. He was a refugee from the regime of Idi Amin. And in Uganda, back home, nearly all his immediate family had been slaughtered by that regime.

He was perhaps the most transparently thankful and joyful person I have ever met. But you could not possibly accuse him of being naive or sentimental in his joyfulness or thankfulness.

He knew how difficult life was. And James is just like that. He's not at all out of touch with reality, so we must take him seriously. How is it possible then, James, to consider trials this way?

[12 : 38] To consider the difficulties that happen in life to us in that optimistic sort of way? Well, verse 5, we need wisdom.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously and without finding fault, and it will be given him. Now, friends, this is not a verse about guidance, what car to buy, what job to go for, what girl to marry.

No, this is here because we don't always know how to face the trials in life in the way that James is saying. We need God's help with how to respond rightly to what comes our way.

Wisdom is needed in order to see things the way James encourages us to see them. And he says, if we lack that kind of wisdom, ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Now, verse 5 contains a wonderful statement. God gives generously to all without reproach. Is that not a marvelous truth?

[13 : 54] God is not irritated that we find life hard and perplexing. God is not grumpy when we need to ask for help to see things the right way.

Isn't that encouraging? God is not angry when we come to him again and again and say, I do not understand this. Please help me to view it rightly. God is willing to give wisdom generously.

To those who want to see the world the right way. That's a marvelous encouragement. So often parents, parents feel that they always ought to be positive about their children asking them things. Don't they? Let me ask the parents among you. Have you always been positive about your children asking you things? Don't you think after about the third or fourth time, no, just shut up and stop asking me questions.

God is not like that. God does not grow tired of hearing his children ask for help to see life the right way. And that is a great encouragement.

[15 : 02] For if you are finding it hard, and if you are finding it hard to trust that God is doing the right thing with your life, he is not angry at your limitation.

He is not irritated by your perplexity. And he is glad to hear you ask for help to deal with it the right way.

Wonderfully reassuring statement. However, along with the reassurance, there is a warning. The question is, says James, not how willing is God to help us.

The question is, how willing are we to go his way? Verse 6. 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's driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

[16 : 04] He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. The point is this, I think. There is no point in asking God to help if you don't want to submit to his will.

In trial, says James, ask God for help, but do it being willing for his answer to be received. Be willing to submit to his way, and he'll give you the wisdom to do that.

But the danger is, of course, that we sometimes don't want to go God's way in the life that he's directing us into.

That's what verse 8 is all about. And here we are back in James' key central theme. The theme of double-mindedness, or literally two-souledness.

The divided person. One half of the person claiming to want to do God's thing, the other half not really being willing to. It's one of the big ideas in this book.

[17 : 09] The idea that it's possible to be divided in loyalty. Saying I want to trust God, not really wanting to trust God. I came across an example a few years ago of this.

A young woman came to talk to me, facing a very difficult situation in life. A Christian woman, a difficult marriage. She'd met another man.

She was facing a decision which, if she was going to do the godly thing, would be costly for her. She said, I have prayed for help about this lot, but I seem to get no help.

I am sure that God wants me to be happy. And so I cannot see why God would want me to do this difficult thing.

Namely, staying with my husband. Now that is to be two-souled. To want happiness and so not want to go God's way. And to pray and to get no help.

[18 : 14] Now of course, ultimately, going God's way will be the happy way. In the end, a crown of life is the ultimate happiness in the end. But it may not be comfortable on the road to the crown of life.

And that's the difficulty, isn't it? If the road ahead looks difficult, en route to the crown of life, sometimes that's a road we don't want to take.

Don't want to go. We may not be happy on the way, brothers and sisters. We may not be happy all the way. But we will be happy in the end.

We've still not answered our question. Why does James start his letter about bad behavior in this way? Look at verses 9 to 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.

[19 : 21] 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.

Now, apparently, we get a big shift in tone between verses 8 and 9. Is there any join between verses 8 and 9?

Well, I think there is, because we noted earlier on that the section starts, verse 2, with trials, and ends, verse 12, with trials.

And I take it, then, that everything that comes in the middle is somehow related. What on earth are verses 9 to 11 doing there? Well, I think they're there because they're precisely the examples of the sorts of trials that James is talking about.

So far, mentioning the word trial, what has come to your mind? Well, you've thought of the obvious things, haven't you?

[20 : 29] Sickness, unexpected sufferings in life, persecution, bereavement, those sorts of big, life-shaking things.

Now, of course, those things are real tests of trust in God. They really are. But they don't test us all that often, not most of us. But there is something, says James, that tests our trust in God all the time, every day.

That is, our financial and material circumstances. Guys, it's time to wake up if you've fallen asleep. Money is what we're talking about.

It's enough to wake everybody up on a Sunday evening. Our money, or lack of it, is the realm in which we are to learn patience and perseverance.

And it's here, says James, that we need God's wisdom. And it's here that we are perhaps particularly in danger of being overtaken by this deadly disease of double-mindedness.

[21 : 34] This is a very searching test. Four, is it not true that most of us spend the best hours of the best years of our lives engaged in activities that determine our financial and material circumstances?

That's what we do with most of our time. We go to work to earn stuff. And what better place to test our allegiance to God than that?

It has been said of this letter that it doesn't have much gospel in it. Well, I think that's quite wrong. For we have here two tests of gospel belief.

First, trial by poverty, verse 9. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation. Now, there's an enormous surprise there.

What on earth is there to boast about if you're a lowly brother? Well, the answer is the thing that has raised you up. There is only one thing in this passage that is in any way elevated, and that is verse 12, the crown of life that the Christian is to receive in the future.

[22 : 50] What is the high position of the lowly brother? His exaltation. Well, his exaltation is that one day the Lord Jesus will give to him a crown of life.

That's what the poor is to glory in, the gospel and its results. And of course, in this life, it is possible to feel inferior, not just materially, but spiritually, because of humble circumstances.

I wonder if you've ever felt ashamed of being materially less well-off than others. Depends on the company a bit, doesn't it? But I wonder if you've felt less respected, less important, a less valid person than others around you who are materially better off.

Money is often right at the heart of the things that give us value and status in this world. We grade people by their material possessions. Usually, in world terms, the rich are better educated, healthier, more sophisticated.

In our culture, some of that has been ironed out by the welfare state, but there are always those who seem more impressive simply because they've got more stuff.

[24 : 16] And the poorer Christian can be made to feel inferior in such circumstances. Not fitting, not belonging, not as important, not as welcome, not as spiritual.

So James says, the poor brother must take pride in his exaltation, take pride in what the gospel has brought to him. This exaltation comes straight from the cross.

It is the cross that lifts up the humble. James says later in chapter four that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Only the cross of Christ makes the poor rich. And there's no doubt that poverty can be a test of trust in God and his gospel.

Will I view myself the way the world does? Will I grade myself the way the world does? Or will I view myself as a person loved by the Lord Jesus Christ and looking forward to a crown of life which he will give to those who love him?

[25 : 25] But, and here we are beginning to get to the answer to our question, there is a much bigger test of gospel belief, a much bigger test, and that is wealth.

Do you notice that there is much more airtime devoted to the rich in these verses than to the poor? The poor are dealt with in half a line. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.

And then we're on to the rich. And the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he'll pass away, for the sun rises with its scorching heat, and withers the grass, its flower falls, its beauty perishes, so also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Why the difference? The poor are dealt with briefly, the rich at length. The poor are encouraged, the rich, well there's a note of warning there, isn't there?

Verses 10 and 11. And I think this must imply that James believes that the trial faced by the rich is greater than the trial faced by the poor.

[26 : 49] That the rich might be less likely to persevere under trial than the poor, more prone to double-mindedness, to that friendship with the world that is enmity with God.

Now let me ask you, friends, do you believe that? Do you believe that the trial of riches is a bigger trial than the trial of poverty? If you were asked, what would be more testing your faith in God?

A little too little or a little too much? What would you say? Well, I fancy the, I actually fancy having a go at the test of riches, don't you?

I mean, not a lottery win or anything like that, but just a little bit more. Wouldn't go amiss for a while, would it? Which one of us doesn't dream from time to time of having just enough to make life a little more straightforward?

If you've ever worried about your job security, your mortgage payments, your children's future, what would happen to your family if you fell ill or died, how you will cope in your old age, you will have imagined what it would be like to have just a little more in the bank than you have at the moment.

[28 : 03] Something to take the pressure off, something to make life less frantic, less anxious, just a little bit more certain, more predictable, less precarious.

Don't you wish for that from time to time? Not vast riches, just a cushion, security, enough to take the worry away.

I certainly don't think that it would be as stretching to gain a few grand as it would be to lose a few grand. James, implies the opposite.

He's referring here to Isaiah 40, that passage we read earlier on. Like a flower of the grass, he will pass away. 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. He reminds the rich of the transience of life.

[29 : 11] Now, I think it's fair to say that money seems to do so much. It takes away some of the stresses of life. It takes away some of the things that remind us of our frailty.

Life seems not so hard. the world seems more comfortable. It is very hard for the rich to remember that wealth and the status it brings is only of passing significance.

But what James says at the end of verse 11 is that despite their apparent security, the rich will die just the same way that the poor do.

just like that the rich will vanish in the middle of what they're doing. The position of the rich is a real test, a serious test to active faith.

Again, the gospel is the antidote. Look at verse 10. Let the rich boast in his humiliation. The gospel says to the rich, don't think that you're secure without the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30 : 18] don't think that because you're near the top of the pile, you're any different from anyone else spiritually. The only way you can have ultimate security, the crown of life, is by recognizing your frailty, finding security in Christ, in his death for you, in the future he promises.

And it involves a climb down to do that. That's why the rich needs to take pride in his humiliation, in the fact that he is no less frail than the poor.

The gospel you see is a great leveler of humanity. There's a great danger for the rich that the rich considers himself secure in this world.

Easy for the rich man to look like and talk like a God trusting person and yet be a person whose security is pretty fundamentally in the fact that he is more than those around him and therefore feels safer.

In a previous church that I worked in, one of the staff lamented the fact that in their 30s and 40s many people seemed to lose their gospel edge, lose their sense of urgency about gospel things because of a kind of creeping materialism which just sat their energy.

[31 : 48] Well, I think that's true and that's the kind of thing that James is talking about here. Well, we've come to the end of James' introduction, verse 12 again, blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.

Let me say two things to close. First, we will often have to try and help those going through difficulty in life.

Can I encourage you not to add to their burden by making them have to see the benefit of their trials in the here and now?

Sometimes Christians say to those in difficulty, oh, well, the Lord will use it for good, almost implying that they ought already to be realizing the good that the Lord will use it for.

But that is not what James is saying here. James is saying that in the end, come the crown of life, then it will be seen that God will have used everything.

[32 : 54] But brothers and sisters, do not add to one another's burdens by encouraging the person in difficulty to feel guilty that they can't get what's going on at the moment.

Many things will happen to you in life that will be utterly perplexing at the time and may be perplexing until the day you die. You'll look back at them and think, I have no idea what the Lord is going to do for good out of that.

But because he has said he will, I trust that in the end it will fit into place. encourage one another to look forwards in difficulty not to look at the present circumstances.

Second thing to say and here we get to our question again, why does James start his letter like this? It's an encouraging sort of start in many ways.

Positive, inviting, count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds. It deals with things that we know we face all the time but in the course of this at first inviting looking introduction James does two very subversive things.

[34 : 15] First, having captured our interest by his encouraging start, he introduces the idea that it is possible to face trials in the wrong way to not want to deal with them rightly.

And second, and even more subversively, he introduces the idea that the big tests of faith are much more everyday than we think.

And perhaps the biggest of all in his mind for his readers is the test that wealth brings. Why is that important in this letter?

Because the status that riches confer, the sense of security that they deliver, the fact that they can make us feel that we no longer need to trust God, the sense of superiority that comes with them, these are the things right at the root of the bad behavior in this letter.

And time and again as the letter goes through, the subject of riches and poverty comes to mind, comes to the surface, and especially the subject of riches.

[35 : 35] Again and again, James goes back to the same problem. There are proud people among James' hearers. They think they love God, but they love the world.

They think themselves superior to others. They're arrogantly dismissive of those of lower status. They think it's perfectly all right to mistreat them despite the fact they should be on a level with them because of the gospel.

Riches are a major factor in the bad behavior in this letter. And verse three is like the bait that grabs the fish.

Verse two rather, count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. Everybody goes towards that thinking, well, what's he going to say? But by the end of the section, the rich have been grabbed by the throat.

Wake up. Wake up. Your riches are a great trial. A great trial. Issues of relative wealth and poverty are often right at the heart of people behaving badly to one another and of Christians behaving badly to one another.

[36 : 52] A great trial, one that needs to be endured single-mindedly, not double-mindedly, looking forward to proper riches, to real wealth, enduring substance that comes when the crown of life is awarded finally.

Let's pray together. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation. salvation. We thank you, Heavenly Father, for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you that in that good news, all human ways of valuing human beings are overturned.

We pray that you would help us this evening to embrace the good news for ourselves. We pray that you would help us not to value ourselves or other people as the world around us does, but rather with sober judgment.

[38 : 22] We acknowledge before you this evening that we desperately need the forgiveness and the life held out to us in the gospel. And we pray that whether we are lowly in the world's eyes or exalted in the world's eyes, you would help us to believe that from the heart.

And we ask not only that we would believe it in our minds, but in the way we relate to one another and to our fellow human beings, you would help us to demonstrate that our true value comes from you and from the promise you've held out to us in Christ.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.