

# An Unexpected Trial

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[ 0 : 00 ] As we begin, let's pray together. Gracious God, we've just sung words, thanking you and praising you for your character, for your greatness, for your powerful deeds, for your truthful words, for your firm promises and your great kindness to those who trust you.

We come here for this brief period, this Wednesday lunchtime, Heavenly Father, from many different situations in life, facing many different difficulties and pressures. And yet we pray that in the midst of these normal things in life, you would help us for this brief period so to hear your words and to trust them, that we are given new perspective on the things that meet us in life today and tomorrow and all the way through life beyond.

Help us then, we pray. Draw near to us as we draw near to you. Please teach us. Please transform our thinking and shed light on our lives.

For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, now, I'd be very glad if you would turn to the Epistle of James and Chapter 1.

[ 1 : 42 ] And in the Church Bibles, you'll find that on page 1011. This is just a lunchtime talk all on its own this week.

And so we're going to look briefly at the first part of James' letter. And I'm going to read from verses 1 to 12 of James Chapter 1.

James, 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 lack wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to 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.

[ 2 : 55 ] For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He's 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.

On Friday last week, five days ago now, Adrian and Gillian Bayford won £148 million on the lottery. Interviewed on television, Mrs Bayford said this, I find it hard to take in the actual quantity of it, not surprising.

[ 4 : 08 ] She said, we've always worked and saved up for holidays or things that we need. We've lived within our means. We've been comfortable, but we've been like ships in the night to earn the income we needed.

It will be fantastic to spend more time as a family now. She added, I'm Scottish. We're known for being tight.

I'll still be hitting the sails. Some things are hard to change, but there is no doubt that £148 million will change life for that family.

And let's be honest, who doesn't sympathise with that? That sentiment, it'll be fantastic to spend more time with the family now.

Though we all, none of us feel we might need £148 million to make that possible, don't you think that all around the country this week, people seeing this story haven't thought to themselves, that'd be nice.

[ 5 : 12 ] And it would, wouldn't it? It's not that we'd all welcome as much as that. £148 million, that much money, brings issues of its own to cope with. But which one of us doesn't dream from time to time of having enough to make life more straightforward?

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

Something to take the pressure off, to make life less frantic, less anxious, a bit more certain, a bit more predictable, a bit less precarious. Don't you wish for that from time to time?

Not vast riches, just a cushion, security, enough to take the edge off the worry. That'd be nice.

It would, wouldn't it? Just to have the pressure off a bit. Well, keep the lottery in mind. We're coming back to it very soon.

[ 6 : 25 ] And look at James chapter 1. And what will be for many a familiar, if rather counter-cultural, exhortation. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

Now this letter is grittily realistic. And yet this first instruction seems a bit out of touch with reality, don't you think? Life, of course, is full of trials, of difficulties.

But that note of joy seems unreal. Hard to understand. Who can count difficulties a joy?

Is James one of those super spiritual people who just dreams along all day, pretending that everything is well when it's not really? A head in the sky kind of person.

Well, no, is the answer to that. He's just giving full weight to another big reality. reality. If trials are a reality in life, then there's another reality that the child of God has to pay proper attention to you.

[ 7 : 30 ] And you'll find it in verse 12. Look on to the end of this section. Do you notice verse 2 starts with trials and we come back to trials in verse 12.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial. And you have to ask, why again that strangely hopeful note?

What's blessed about keeping going through difficulty? And James tells us what's blessed about that. Verse 12, 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, you see, a proper realist, a biblical realist. He takes the whole view in. Just as real as the difficulties that happen to us in life is the great future beyond this world that God has promised to those who love him.

Trials, of course, will come your way in life. But for the one who endures patiently, hoping and loving God, a great crown of life awaits.

[ 8 : 47 ] Two big realities then. Trials, things that are a test to faith in God all the way through life, and a great crown of life at the end for the person who perseveres in trusting God.

Still got the lottery in mind? Just keep it there, we're coming back to it in a moment. Can I say that Christians are immune to none of the difficulties that will happen to anyone in this life?

Belonging to God doesn't get you out of anything here. Anything that can happen in this world might happen to you.

Don't let it take you by surprise when it does. It doesn't mean that God isn't there or that he doesn't care. And verse 12 is the ultimate fulfillment of his loving care, a crown of life which the thoroughly dependable God has promised to those who love him.

And that should be cause for genuine optimism and difficulty. I remember my most stressful examination ever. My postgraduate medical exams.

[ 10 : 00 ] I got out of my car, I closed the door, I looked at the hospital where the examination was going to be. I thought to myself, this is awful. I thought to myself, well, at least in three hours it'll be over.

And I'll probably walk out the door alive. But that was all I could hope for at that point. At least the nasty thing will stop and I'll still be alive. Is that James' kind of hope?

Well, it isn't. He's much more optimistic than that. God has not promised one day that the bad stuff will be over. No. God has promised that a crown of life will belong to you if you're one who trusts and loves the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's much more positive than just thinking, well, in three hours I'll still be alive. And it's because of God's truthfulness and God's love that James is able to say that even the present difficulties will be useful.

Look at verse 2 again. 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.

[ 11 : 16 ] It's not that bad things are good. It's that the good God will use even the most difficult things in life for the ultimate good of his children.

You see, every time I face a difficulty in life there is the possibility that I won't keep trusting God in it. I'll stop trusting his promises and I need to go that keep, know that keeping going is worth it. And one of the things that will keep me going is knowing that the end is worth it. But James is saying more than that here. He's saying it's worth keeping going because the keeping going is worth it.

God will use the keeping going through difficulty in his purposes in the end to make me the person he wants me to be and give me the future he wants me to have.

Now that is an amazing truth, isn't it? Whatever you're going through now, and I don't say this tritely because some of you will be going through great difficulties in life now. Whatever you are going through now, persevere at it.

[ 12 : 26 ] Trust God in it. And in the end, God will use that persevering for your good. Now to have that kind of perseverance, we're going to need wisdom.

And that's what verse 5 is about. 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's a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Why is this stuff about wisdom here? Well, it's not a verse about guidance. What car to buy? I know I'll ask God for wisdom to make the right choice. No.

The point is here that we don't always know how to face up to the trials in life. What to think, what to do, how to react. We lack wisdom for how to deal with life's realities, don't you?

[ 13 : 29 ] I find myself often in that position just not knowing how to deal with something. God promises to give wisdom to the person who lacks the ability to know what to do given the trials of life.

And that is a wonderful truth. You see, God is not irritated that we find it difficult to know what to do. Isn't that a relief?

Sometimes we worry that if we were more spiritual, we'd deal better with the things in life. Well, no. God is not irritated that we need to ask help to see things in the right way and deal with things in the right way.

God is not angry that we need to ask for his help in life's difficulties. It's wonderfully reassuring. God is not like an irritated parent who hasn't really got time to help his children.

No, he's not like that. Let me say again, that's a great encouragement. If you're finding it hard, finding it hard to trust that God is doing the right thing with your life, he is not cross with that.

[ 14 : 44 ] He gives generously to all without reproach. He's glad to hear you ask for help and promises that he will help in times of difficulty.

Still got the lottery in mind? We're nearly back at it. We're nearly back at it. Hang on to it for a moment. There is a warning here as well as an encouragement. Verse 6.

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. That person must not suppose that he'll receive anything from the Lord.

He's a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. The question, the big question is not how willing is God to help me in my difficulties but how willing am I to go his way in my difficulties? No point in asking help from God says James if you don't want to submit to his will. The danger of course is that we don't want to go God's way in the trials of life.

[ 15 : 52 ] We know what's best. We know what's best for us. And that's what verse 8 is about. That double-minded word. It literally two-souled.

Two-personed. A two-person person. Somebody with two persons inside. One that wants to do the right thing. One that doesn't want to do the right thing. It's one of the big ideas in this book. That it's possible to be divided in loyalty as a Christian believer.

Saying that I trust God, not really trusting God. wanting to go God's way, not really wanting to go God's way. I talked a while ago to a person facing great difficulty in life.

Facing a situation in which if she was going to do the godly thing it would be very, very costly to do it. It was the godly thing to do. She said, I've prayed for help about this lots but I get no help.

I am sure that God wants me to be happy and so I cannot see that God would want me to do this difficult thing. Now that is to be too sold.

[17:00] To want happiness and so not want to go the godly way. And so pray and get no help. Of course ultimately God's way will be the happy way to have gone.

A crown of life will be very happy in the end. It may not be happy on the journey all the way but it will be in the end. Still got the lottery in mind?

We're right on the brink now. 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, its beauty perishes.

So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Now you could read that and think to yourself he's taken his mind off the argument here. Why are we talking here about lowliness and richness? But he goes back verse 12 to the subject of trials again.

[18:08] Do you notice that? Why are these verses 9 to 11 in here? What on earth is going on? Let me ask you a question.

What have you had in mind so far as to what might be the big trials you face in life? What are the trials we face in life? The moment you think about that they come spilling out of your mind.

Well I wouldn't like to be sick and I wouldn't like to be terminally ill and I wouldn't like suffering or persecution to happen in life and I wouldn't like anything nasty to happen in my family or my job.

Of course those are trials aren't they? No doubt about it. But for most of us they don't happen all of the time or most of the time even. But there is something that does happen all of the time and tests every day our trust in God and that is our financial and material circumstances.

every day our finances, our stuff, our possessions test our dependence on God.

[19:19] Still got the lottery in mind? Well here we are at last and this is where James puts the finger in terms of talking about trials. Of course there are many trials in life but the examples he gives are verse 9, the trial of lowliness or poverty and verse 10, the trial of riches.

Now this is a very searching set of tests. Here we are at last in lottery territory. That's where James takes his readers. Friends, it is in the ordinary everyday things of life, everyday things, that God tests the genuineness of our faith.

our money or lack of it. It's here that we need God's wisdom. It's here that we're perhaps most in danger of being too sold.

Wanting to trust God, not wanting to trust God. It's a very searching test. For most of us spend the best hours of the best years of our lives engaged directly in the activities which determine our financial and material circumstances.

What better place to test our allegiance to God than this? Two tests of gospel belief then. One, trial by poverty, verse 9.

[20:46] Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation. What high position has the lowly brother got? Well, the answer is the lowly brother, verse 12, is going to receive a great crown of life in the end.

The gospel lifts people up, gives people a great reward no matter who they are in the end. But of course the poorer Christian can be made to feel inferior because of their humble circumstances in life, can be made to feel less valuable.

The poor brother needs to take pride in his high position. And of course the gospel is all about how God gives a great reward to people who don't deserve it at all and haven't got anything to offer.

God gives us a crown of life because of what Jesus has done by his death for us and only for that reason. Not because of any of the other things that belong to us in life.

This exaltation, verse 9, comes straight from the cross of the Lord Jesus. It is the cross that lifts the lowly up. No other possible source for this exaltation.

[ 22 : 06 ] Poverty is a test of trust in God. wealth. But, much bigger in the testing department is wealth.

You'll notice that the poor brother gets a line in verse 9. The rich gets a couple of verses, 10 and 11. The language about the rich is ambiguous. The language about the poor is unambiguous. The poor is called a brother. The rich is just called a rich man.

Why the difference? Well, I think because the greater warning is in verses 10 and 11. The poor are dealt with briefly, the rich at length. The poor are encouraged, the rich are warned.

The trial faced by the rich is greater than the trial faced by the poor in James' eyes. The trial of riches is less easy to endure than the trial of...

[ 23 : 12 ] Now, can you believe that to be true? Brothers and sisters, left to myself, I do not believe that. Do you? I think the test of being hard up is much bigger than the test of being rich.

Don't you? Still got the lottery in mind? We might well think that the test of riches is a test we'd like to have a go at in life.

Wouldn't you fancy a bit of the trial of riches from time to time in life? I would. Maybe not 148 million, but I certainly don't think it would be as stretching to gain a few grand as it would be to lose a few grand.

James suggests quite alternatively to that. Why do I fancy that a bit more money would be nice?

Well, for all sorts of reasons, it would make life more comfortable.

But one of the reasons is it would deliver me from having to trust God on an everyday basis. Money buys security, does it not? It does take away some of the stresses of life.

[ 24 : 21 ] It really does. It takes away some of the things that remind us of our human frailty. Life seems not so hard. This world seems a more comfortable place when you're a rich man than when you're a poor man.

It is very hard indeed for the rich to remember that wealth and the status it brings is only of passing significance. But it is, verse 10, like a flower of the grass, the rich will 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.

Now, this is a difficult illustration to get a hold on in Scotland because the sun is not blazing like this, is it? This is a Middle Eastern sun. Picture the rains, the flowers spring up quickly, the sun comes out quickly and fries everything that's grown.

Never happens here, does it? But it did there. Very familiar image that, taken interestingly from Isaiah and Isaiah's message. The point is this.

[ 25 : 35 ] Riches look substantial and enduring. enduring. They buy stuff that looks substantial and enduring.

Does the rich man's car look more solid than the poor man's car? Too right it does. And everything else about his stuff looks more solid. But it is not more solid.

The position of the rich is dangerous. Again, the gospel is the antidote because it says to the rich, don't think you're secure without Christ. Let the rich boast in his humiliation.

You see, the gospel brings people down as well as up. It levels everybody out. Everybody's the same. The great danger for the rich is that the rich considers himself secure in this world.

James fears for the rich man that he is in great danger of disappearing with his riches at the end. great danger in life is of being two-souled, double-minded, divided in loyalty, not really trusting the God that we think we trust.

[ 26 : 49 ] Now, friends, we are much more secure in this world than most people in this world have ever been. Many of the reminders of our frailty have been made less acute by our relative wealth.

our great danger is of two-souledness, double-mindedness, looking like God trusting people, yet being people whose security is actually all tied up with their material circumstances.

wouldn't it be nice to have just a little more? Well, of course, in one sense it would, and it might be a good gift from God, but not if it made me less dependent on the God on whom I'm really dependent, and not if it made me more secure in a world that is passing away, and not if it took my eyes off the crown of life and fixed my eyes on all the good things that can be had now.

Let's pray together. Blessed, happy, fortunate, to be envied 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. We thank you, gracious God, for the promise of life that you have held out to us in the

good news of Jesus Christ.

[ 28 : 37 ] And we pray that whatever our circumstances in life, in difficulty or in ease, in poverty or in riches, you would help us to be people who firmly believe your promise and steadfastly walk through this life all the way to that crown in the end.

Help us not to believe the lie that material security brings ultimate security. Hear us, we pray, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.