

James: The Practical Christian

Welcoming God's Strange Messengers

James 1:2-12

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Scripture

Someone once posted a sheet of paper on a bulletin board with the following heading: *“You know it’s going to be a bad day when. . . .”*

Allow me to share a few of the “whens” with you. You know it’s going to be a bad day when. . .

- You wake up to the soothing sound of running water—and then remember that you just bought a waterbed.
- You spend \$75 at the hair dresser—and when you get home your dog starts barking at you.
- People think you are 40—and you really are.
- The worst player on the golf course wants to play you for money.
- Your car horn goes off accidentally and remains stuck as you find yourself following a group of Hell’s Angels down the freeway.
- It’s Nerd Day at the Junior High School—and your 14-year old son asks if he can borrow some of your clothes.

But the truth is that many of our problems in life just aren’t quite that humorous, are they?

You may be faced with problems related to family, marriage, health, vocation, career, finances, drugs, abuse, and so on. How do you deal with the problems that come your way in life?

Today, we are going to learn from the Book of James how to welcome God’s strange messengers, these trials and troubles that come our way. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 1:2-12:

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking

anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

⁹ The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

¹² Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (James 1:2-12)

Introduction

A seasoned poet once wrote, “It was pain that knocked upon my door and said that she had come to stay. And though I would not welcome her but asked her to go away, she still entered in. And like my own shadow she followed after me and from her stabbing, stinging sword no moment was I free.”

The poet describes a very difficult, painful situation. It is the problem of trials that just won't go away.

If I could borrow the words from Shakespeare's “A Comedy of Errors,” I would describe that person as “a wretched soul bruised with adversity.”

But that person is not unique, for in some way or another, that is a description of every one of us.

Many of you here today are bruised by your trials. And the bruises are not always the kind you can see on the outside, but they are on the inside. Some of you are bruised on the outside by physical pain and sickness. And some of you are bruised over the death of loved ones. Others of you are facing emotional trauma, rela-

tional stress, spiritual doubts, marital conflicts, sexual temptations, financial setbacks, occupational disappointments, and so on.

One of the most common experiences of human life is the experience of difficulty and problems. And no matter what some may tell you today, Christians are not exempt from having serious problems.

Notice in verse 2 that James carefully uses the words, **“whenever you face trials.”** He does not say, **“if you face trials.”** Whether you live one day or one century, you will experience what James calls **“trials of many kinds”** (1:2). Trials come in a myriad of different ways, but they always come.

James is not alone in pointing out that trials are the common reality in our lives. For example, King David says, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Psalm 34:19a, *NKJV*).

Job says that “man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1).

The apostle Paul says that we are “hard pressed, . . . perplexed, . . . persecuted, . . . struck down” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

The apostle Peter says, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

Lesson

Trials are common to all people! But what is not common, however, is your response to those inevitable trials that come your way. In today’s text, James shows you how to respond to your trials.

I. You Are to Respond to Your Trials with Joy (1:2-4)

First, you are to respond to your trials with joy.

James says in verse 2, **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. . . .”**

I wonder how the Christians of the 1st century reacted to that piece of advice. You've got to admit that it sounds a little bit like stereotypical "Preacher Talk"! These people to whom James originally wrote were facing very serious trials.

James describes the people to whom he wrote in verse 1 as "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1). These were primarily Jewish Christians who had been persecuted for their faith in Christ, and as a result they were scattered throughout the ancient world.

In those days a Jewish Christian was a hated person. He was hated by the Romans and the Gentiles because he was Jewish. And he was hated by his fellow Jews because he was Christian.

As a result of persecution many Jewish Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem and also their homes and belongings and friends. They scattered and settled in various cities around the Mediterranean basin.

People who have lost their homes and belongings as a result of Hurricane Katrina have some inkling of what it is like to be homeless and displaced.

And so James begins his letter by telling those displaced Christians to respond to their severe trials with "**pure joy**"!

But how do you do that? When your dreams go sour, when your plans fall through, when your spouse leaves you, when you lose your job, when you discover your child on drugs, when you have memories of sexual abuse, when you lose everything in a hurricane, how can you honestly respond to such trials with "**pure joy**"?

James answers that question in this passage. He tells you that you can respond to your trials with "**pure joy**" when you realize that all of your trials have *divine purpose*.

Trials have a *divine purpose*. If you grasp this truth, you will be immeasurably helped in your Christian walk. Furthermore, James doesn't leave us wondering what that purpose is. He tells us what that purpose is in verses 3-4.

First, the divine purpose of trials is to develop perseverance. James says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, **because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance**” (1:2-3). The first thing God wants you to learn in your trials is **perseverance**. The Greek word translated **perseverance** literally means “to abide under.” In modern parlance we would call this “staying power.” It is the ability to hang in there when there is no answer on the surface.

If you are ever going to be faithful in maintaining your marriage vows, or in raising obedient children, or in taking care of aging parents, or in managing your vocation, you are going to need staying power. God knows that, and that is why he allows trials to come your way—so that you will grow in your ability to persevere.

Notice carefully the words in verse 3, “**the testing of your faith.**” The many tests in life are not to be seen in a negative way, but rather they are to be seen as *God’s Special Messengers*, as strange friends sent by God to teach us something of great value.

I love the J. B. Phillips translation of verses 2-3, which reads as follows: “When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.”

The many trials that God allows to come your way are never meant to hurt you but rather to help you. Various trials come into your life as God’s strange messengers to approve and strengthen your faith.

At just 5-foot-10 and 202 pounds, Walter Payton was not a particularly big running back for the National Football League. But he set one of sport’s greatest records: the all-time rushing record of 16,726 yards. During his twelve-year career, Payton carried the football over nine miles!

What is truly impressive, though, is that he was knocked to the ground on average every 4.4 yards of those nine miles by someone bigger than himself. But he kept getting up because he understood that his purpose was not to stay down but to persevere.

When you realize that God allows trials to come into your life for a purpose, then you can hang in there and stay with it. Why? **Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance**" (1:3).

But **perseverance** is not the supreme Christian virtue! God doesn't simply send you trials to give you **perseverance**. James goes on to tell you the second purpose of trials in your life.

Second, the divine purpose of trials is to develop maturity.

James says in verse 4, **"Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."**

God's purpose for you is to make you spiritually mature and complete. He wants to form in you all the character qualities of his Son. God wants you not to be lacking in anything spiritually. He wants you to be a whole person, a person of seasoned spiritual maturity, one who has all the graces of the Christian life worked into your life in depth. And he knows that one of the best ways of doing this is by allowing trials to come into your life.

Someone once said that God is not as concerned about your *comfort* as he is about your *character*. When you understand that truth, you will be able to endure trials better.

The people that I know who have a mature Christian character are those who have learned to handle life in the furnace. It's the mother whose child has died and is able to say to God, "You gave and you took away; blessed by your name."

It's the father who comes home having lost his job and says to his family, "Let's thank God for this opportunity to trust him to care for us."

It's the teenager who is pressed to compromise and says, "I will not give up my principles. I will maintain God's standards, even though right now I feel so unliked by everybody."

There is this marvelous quality of maturity that emerges when you are patient under the load. That is why James says that trials are a common experience to which you are to respond with

pure joy. God wants you not to measure things by their capacity to please you but rather by their capacity to mold you.

Instead of always trying to avoid trials or resenting them as intruders, you must learn to embrace them as friends. Realize that the more you fight against them, the longer it will take for you to grow to maturity.

So, the first way to respond to your trials is with joy.

II. You Are to Respond to Your Trials with Prayer (1:5-11)

Second, you are to respond to your trials with prayer.

There are two things to note about this prayer.

First, you must pray for God's wisdom. In verse 5 James writes, **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”** Remember, the context of verse 5 is verses 2-4. James is saying that if, in the midst of your trials, you want to gain some insight into what God is doing in your life, then you ought to ask God to give you that insight.

When you are surrounded by confusing problems and trials, seeing no way out, what should you do? James says in verse 5, “Ask God! And he will give you that wisdom.” The word **wisdom** means *learning to look at life from God's perspective*. It is learning to see what is happening to you from God's vantage point. It is the skill of learning to see and live life God's way. God is saying, “If you lack insight into the way to live with your trials and disappointments and difficulties, ask me and I will show you.”

James goes on to tell you exactly how you are to be asking God in prayer.

Second, you must pray with faith. James writes in verses 6-8, **“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”**

When you ask God for wisdom in the midst of your trials, one of the qualifications is that you come to him in faith, that you really want to know in order to cooperate with what God is doing, that you do not come to God as a double-minded man.

A person who is double-minded is a person who wants his will and at the same time wants God's will. He is like the character in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* named "Mr. Going Both Ways." He wants to serve God—but then he doesn't. He is all out for God—but then he's not quite so sure. He wants to see God work in his life—but he doesn't want it to cost him. He's back and forth. With one mind he wants to serve God—but with the other he is not so sure. That kind of person will receive nothing from God.

A person who is double-minded is like the student who wants to audit the class on "Total Commitment"! He likes the title of the class—but he is not sure that he really wants to commit totally.

In verses 9-11 James gives us two very practical illustrations of people who have learned to pray with faith. One is an example of a poor man who lacks money, and the second is an example of a rich man who loses money.

The first illustration of a poor man is found in verse 9. James writes, "**The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.**" James says that the poor man ought to learn from God, through the trial of his poverty, how to glory in how rich he really is in Christ. It is no fun to be poor. But James says that such a person can learn through his poverty to glory in his high estate in Christ, to glory in the fact that real riches are not found so much in what a man *has* as in what a man *is*. Although a man is materially poor, he is spiritually rich. He may be traveling rough roads now, and others may not know who he is, but God does! And he rejoices in that.

The second illustration of a rich man is found in verses 10-11. If it's tough to lack money, it's even tougher to lose money. In verses 10-11 we find a man who loses his money. What kind of insight is he to gain? James says, "**But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a**

wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.” The rich man can learn that a man who puts his trust in money puts his trust in a phantom. Why? Because riches can be so quickly taken away.

Conclusion

The result of learning to trust God in the midst of your trials is spelled out for you in verse 12: **“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”** James gives two promises.

The first promise is the promise of true happiness. The first part of verse 12 says, **“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial.”** The word **blessed** means “genuinely happy” or “truly happy.” It is a happiness that is deep and profound, and that does not arise out of circumstances. When you learn to trust God in the midst of your trials, you will be happy like you’ve never been happy in your life. When the trials come, you will be able to say, “Thank you, Father, for your trust in me to handle this trial. Teach me through this trial what I need to learn.”

The second promise is the promise of reward. The second part of verse 12 says, **“. . . because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”** When James talks about the **crown of life** he is referring, on the one hand, to a future reward that is given to all of you who persevere in faith in the face of trials. But, on the other hand, James also has in mind a temporal crown as well, for in the Bible a crown was seen not only as a reward but also as a symbol. A crown is a symbol of victory and joy.

When you undergo trials and respond to them by trusting God and persevering in your faith, you will receive the **crown of life** itself in that God will give you a quality of life you could never

have any other way. In the face of trials, when you learn to say, “Lord, teach me what I am to learn through this experience,” the result will be blessing and joy as only God can give.

The man of faith finds a special delight in difficulties since he knows that it is by his difficulties that God is grooming him into the likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Someone once said that, “All of us are facing a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems.”

As I prepared this message I was very conscious of the people struggling in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I was so struck by what Pastor Jeffrey Lancaster, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, said. He reports that he and his family have lost everything they own. He states: “Pray for us, these are very bizarre times. My life has wildly changed, but my God has not—I’m thankful for our rock.” That, dear friend, is trust in God.

Let me tell you that if your response to testing is like that and what I have described today, you are in for some of the most exciting lessons God could ever teach one of his children. Whatever you are now facing, know that it is not for your bad but for your good. It’s not to see you drown but to see you swim. It’s to approve your faith. So don’t fight it anymore. Learn to trust God, and let the trials have their perfect result in your life. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, your servant, the apostle Peter once wrote these words to Christians, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6, 7). O Lord, the only way out from under your mighty hand is to yield, to give in, to surrender, and to humble ourselves before you.

Lord, it is so easy to trust you when the sun is shining and the morning has just begun. But it’s another thing entirely to trust you when the clouds are heavy and there is no end in sight and the day is past.

I pray today for those here today who are wounded and hurting. I pray for your children who are undergoing the sorrows and pains that have moved in to stay. Lord, show them the importance of submitting to your perfect will so that they might be approved and find life in all its fullness.

Father, for those here today who are not yet Christians, lead them by your Holy Spirit to receive Christ this day as their Savior from sin and Lord of life.

O Father, all of this we ask this in Jesus’ name by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CHARGE:

When troubles come your way remember that they do not come as an enemy but as a servant. Welcome them as God’s strange messengers that come with a note in their hand. And when you open it, it reads, “This is for your perseverance and ultimately for your character development in Christlikeness.”

And as you learn to count even your trials as pure joy, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.