

When Life Lets You Down

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- [0 : 0 0] As Cody said, we're beginning a new series in our evening worship, going through fairly rapidly before the end of the year, the book of James.
- So we're mainly taking a chapter at a time. So it is an overview, but tonight we're looking at the first chapter, we're splitting that into two. And this will also be the source for the brief questions, or maybe brief answers, that are shared identity at our young people's meetings.
- So I'm not sure if there's any identity leaders here tonight. Hands up, they are, they've come back from their wanderings. That's good. So we do have some identity leaders, so that's good.
- The questions are at the back if you're looking for them for later on. So there will be some questions for the young people, maybe more practical, based on the study this evening.
- So James chapter one, verses one to 12, great book of the Bible, and a very practical book. Now around Edinburgh at the festival, you notice more and more.
- [1 : 0 7] Every year I think there's more and more comedians. There's more and more comedy shows. It seems to be the avant-garde, popular kind of entertainment that goes with the festival these days.
- And some of the humour is, I'm sure, not that I get to go to any of it, but there's different kinds of humour, isn't there? But I've always found any comedian worth his salt is usually an observational comedian, someone who's observing life, who's seeing ordinary things, things that we see every day and that actually are quite funny, and make some quite funny.
- Just observing life and focusing on that as the means of getting a laugh and exposing some humour.
- And if you can look at the book of James in a similar way, it's observational truth that we have in James. So we don't have a deep doctrinal treatise in James.
- What we've got is James looking at, by the Holy Spirit and by God's grace, he's looking at truth and he's looking at Christians and he's saying, this is how you should live.
- [2 : 2 1] He's observing what they're doing or not doing and saying, look, this is the kind of life that you should live. It's actually very linked in with what we were talking about this morning from Exodus, about the priesthood of all believers and the importance of living out being a holy people.
- And James is very much about that. It is observational wisdom from God, it's faith in action. So we don't have any kind of introduction that gives us the theology of the cross.
- In many ways, James is presuming all of that knowledge and so are we in many ways also. That he's coming to a people who are gods, they're believers and he's saying, this is how it should be.
- This is how you should be living out the priesthood of all believers. This is how you should be following Jesus Christ in practical ways. It's very much about faith in action.

And if you were to, if there was to be maybe a key verse that sums up the whole of James as a letter, it would be James chapter one and verse 22.

[3 : 33] Not be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourselves. So that's really the key. He's saying you have the word, you know Jesus Christ, you love him.

Now go out and live that knowledge, live the newness, live the new life that you've been, you were dead, you've been brought to life, you were lost, you're found, you were once not a people, now you are a people.

Now live it. Live out that. And so there's a great practical application. But what we must realise as we look at James is that this is not a spiritual self-help manual.

He isn't saying this is how you should live. Now get on with it because as a guilt inducing kind of way of life, this is how you must live and he has a whole lot of boxes that you need to take and if you live that way, then you'll be doing fine.

That would be a council of despair, wouldn't it? Anything that would ask us to live morally or live ethically or please God in our own strength by simply outwardly ticking certain boxes in our behaviour would be a council for despair because we can't do it, can we?

[4 : 48] And if you look at James and think this is how I have to live, you'll hate it because it would be for you a council of despair because what James is reminding us is that in order to live this way, we need to rely on God and we need to recognise that the Christian life is a life of miracle.

As we rely on him, it's real recognising that we need his grace. In other words, it's not a self-help manual. It is a grace sat nav, if I could use that illustration.

It's a sat nav that points us towards grace because without grace we can't live the Christian life if I was to take another key verse which sums up the book.

It would be in James chapter 4 and in verse 6, but he gives more grace. It's the giving God that we saw this morning that we were speaking about.

He gives more grace, God is opposed to the humble, but God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So it's a book that says, this is how we live our Christian lives.

[6 : 01] You can't live this way, your Christian life, on your own. You need grace. So it's kind of pointing us back always to the living God and reminding us that in order to be new creations to live out this life, we need grace and we need God.

That's what we'll speak about briefly this evening. James is reputed to have been the brother of Jesus and very much a leader in the church.

Acts 15 speaks about him as taking this lead role in the church. He was often called James the Just because he was a righteous man and because he loved the law.

He was a real, in many ways, an Old Testament Jew who loved the law but who also loved grace. And he could just see this law of love, this law of loving God and loving his neighbour as we saw this morning.

And he wanted the people to live it. That's what he wanted. James the Just, he wanted people and believers and the Christians throughout the whole dispersion.

[7 : 13] He wanted them to take grace out of the church. And he wanted to take grace out of only their brain.

Well, it must be there also. He wanted from theory and he wanted to take grace and them to take grace into their lives.

So he wanted to move it from merely being a discussion topic in the church to being the driving force of their lives.

That grace is what motivated them. And so we come to this first section which speaks about the testing of your faith or the trials of life, count it, all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

So Ivan, and he explains how we can make use of the trials of life to display grace.

[8 : 13] It's a great little section. Now I've entitled this section the commute of life. Okay? Now I've done that very deliberately. I decided not to use the word journey, the journey of life, because that's quite a positive and quite an exciting concept, the journey of life.

Well, you're on a journey and journeys are exciting because we're going somewhere and because it's usually somewhere good on the journeys of life.

Well, at least for me it has that connotation. Whereas commute has a much more negative connotation. Because it relates more to the daily grind, doesn't it?

The daily grind of living. For me anyway, there's negative connotations about the idea of commuting every day, the delays, the tiredness, the time that it takes, the disturbance that it brings into your day, the people that you've got to sit beside on your commute and all the hassles that goes with it.

And that is really what James is speaking about here. He's not speaking about the glamorous journeys of life that we all go on or that we dream of and that we hope for. He's speaking about the daily commute of our Christian lives, the grind, the trials of life.

[9 : 34] So he says, can it all join, my brothers and sisters, it's a generic term. When you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance or steadfastness.

And James is speaking to this people and saying how we respond as believers to the commute of life, to the daily grind to the trials of life.

Now some people have taken the trials that he speaks of here as severe times of persecution. There doesn't seem to be any evidence for that exclusively.

But rather that he's just talking about, yes persecution because that was part of the life of the believer and always is, but just the general trials that you will wake up tomorrow with, that we've woken up today with, the general trials of living life.

Poverty and riches, he goes on to speak about poverty and riches. And he says that in many ways, either extreme, those who are rich and those who are poor face different, albeit, but they do face trials of life.

[10 : 51] It may be illness, it may be loss, it may be the challenges of who you work beside, it may be the challenges of a career or a study or a relationship or temptation, inner battles, outward battles, the trials of life.

You've all got them. We all share them. We all have these trials of life. And when we face and when we come up to and when we wake up tomorrow with these trials and facing these trials, the temptation for us, I guess, usually is to escape them.

We don't really, we're not really that keen on facing up to the trials of life. We would rather have pleasure to replace the trials of life and we would rather indulge ourselves than recognize the significance that we deal with these trials in a positive way.

Or we can just entrench ourselves. Very often as Christians we do that. We just entrench ourselves. We say, well, this is just life as it is and we'll just hang in there until heaven and we'll just survive and thawl the trials, a sacred word, isn't it?

But all the young people haven't heard that word. It's a good old fashioned word, thawl. We thawl the trials. We just, we just survive them no more. And we think, ordinariness is a curse.

[12 : 13] So that we're living in a society that tells us, you don't need trials. Just go away. Enjoy yourself. Buy yourself out of them. Ordinariness is dull.

Get rid of that life's commute. Why should you live such a dull and trial filled life? Look for adventure. Look for pleasure. Fulfill that enormous bucket list that you have and do all the wonderful things that you want to do in life.

Now, I'm not saying that's not right and that we can't indeed enjoy these things, but not at the exclusion of dealing with the ordinariness of the trials of life.

We're in such a danger sometimes of wishing our lives away because we don't like the trial section and we just want the pleasure section.

And so often many people's goals is to limit any kind of trial, any kind of difficulty, any kind of challenge or opposition, whether it be from people or from jobs or from health or whatever it might be.

[13 : 21] But what does James tell us is the Christian goal in the commute of life, in the trials of life that you will face tomorrow. How are you to react to them? How am I to respond to them?

How are we to deal with the trials of life when they come? Well, James recognizes and says that the Christian goal when we face trials in life is to allow them to make us mature and perfect Christians.

That is complete, not perfect as in sinless, but perfect as in complete mature. So he has a different and God has a different view of the trials of life that you will face and I face tomorrow is that in order to be fulfilled as a Christian, to be transformed as a Christian, to be Christ like as a Christian, to be faithful as a Christian, we need to face and deal with these trials in a spiritual way and recognize that they are for our benefit to mature us and to make us complete.

And that sanctification, that holiness that we get doesn't come from a bucket. It doesn't come from a bucket list. It comes in the ordinariness of life dealing with these trials, whatever they might be, and you and I will all face different trials.

It comes from dealing with them spiritually and taking them to God in our lives. So in the commute of life, God is saying to us that the trials we face don't run away from them, don't look for extra ones, as plenty as there is, but when we face them every day which we do, then recognize that they are used by God as we allow him to do so, to make us mature as Christians.

[15 : 13] How can this happen? How is it possible that we can come to that place of finding joy in the trials of life and becoming mature and complete?

How can we do that? It's a counsel for despair, isn't it? It's impossible. This is speaking about someone in a different plane to me that can go through these difficulties and be joyful and be growing through them.

Well, isn't that what James is about? It's highlighting the impossibility to drive us back to God and to ask.

That's what we're to do when we realize that we struggle with this whole concept. He says if any of you lack wisdom, that is wisdom to respond in the right way to the trials of life.

He says, let him ask of God. So right away there's a presumption of a relationship. See, he hasn't gone through the whole theological invitation to come to Christ.

[16 : 18] He's presuming it here that as believers there is a relationship and you as a Christian, I as a Christian, need to recognize that presumption that God expects us to ask of him.

He expects us to be in relationship. He expects us to look at his demands of grace and say, God, I can't do this. I can't live this life.

I need your wisdom. I need your grace. If we don't do that, what will James become? It will become a book of legislation and a book of judgment and a counsel of despair for us.

We can ask of God because God takes our lives and he knows us and he loves us and he transforms our experience. Now I'm going to use, and I know I'm not supposed to use football illustrations, but it's all I know.

It's all I know. I don't have any dungy, they're shaking their heads at the back, all the intellects. But that's what happens. So there's two great coaches around just now in the world. Well, I'm sure there's many more, but two of them and they were playing in different games this week, Guardiola and Brendan Rogers.

[17 : 31] Now they're good coaches. And what's great about these coaches is that they take players who are good, but who maybe have gone off the boil and they can make them play their best because they're good coaches and because they understand them and because they've built a relationship with these players.

And what do they do to these really great players? Do they say to them, hey, you're a great player. Just take it easy. You don't need to train today. Yeah, head away and have a McDonald's after the end of the day and stay up late.

And yeah, if you want to gamble a bit of your time, that's fine and a bit of your money. No, they don't. They don't spoil them. They take them and they say, look, when you're tested on the field, you show yourself to be the best player by working hard and by training hard.

And they push them as well as relating to them. They don't spoil them. And that's exactly what God does with us. He doesn't spoil us. He doesn't say, yes, I'm sorry, you've got trials.

That's terrible. Yeah, well, just I'll just wish all the trials away. He knows us and he loves us and he recognizes that these trials he will use to mature and perfect us.

[18 : 46] And he comes alongside us. We ask. And what do we ask for? We ask for wisdom. What might be our default position?

Lord, take away this trial. That's what we ask. Lord, take away this bad thing. Take away this problem. Take away this person.

Take away this struggle. Take away this debt. Take it away. You're a miracle worker. But no, he doesn't ask us to ask for change primarily.

He asks us to ask for wisdom. To respond to life's battles and struggles like he wants us to respond with grace.

And therefore, to know that James is setting out a theology here, although it's very practical, which says to be a Christian is not to live a trial for your life.

[19 : 43] Often to be a Christian is to live a life with more trial than if you're not a Christian. That means that he gives us grace to see these trials maturing and developing us and making us complete as people.

So what makes us complete as people isn't necessarily a Holiday in Lanzarote, which we might think will make us complete, but in the ordinary commute of life, allowing his sovereign grace to transform the sheer dullness of the trials that we face.

So we ask for wisdom. What does that involve? It involves a few things. I'll rush through this. It involves asking, I think, very significantly the right questions when we are faced with trials.

He says, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and lets steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing.

So very often when we face these trials in a daily basis, we say, why God? Why are you letting me go through this? You said you love me, but no one who loves me would let me go through this.

[20 : 58] And so often we ask why? Or we ask why not them? So I'm going through trouble, but it doesn't seem fair that I'm going through trials. Why don't they go through trials?

They're far worse than I am. Why aren't they going through trials? That is also the wrong question. Shouldn't it be for us that we ask the question, how rather than why?

How can I mature through what is happening? That's a really tough question to ask. And it's not a pious, it's not a pious question. It's a gritty grace question.

This trial that I'm going through, how can God change me through it rather than change my circumstances or other people who I would love if God would change them because they're so miserable and in pain in the neck?

So the focus therefore is moved from us blaming God for our trials or blaming other people, and maybe especially the church, and increased possibly even the minister, from that to looking at what life throws to every one of us and asking, how is God wanting me to be transformed through this trial?

[22 : 16] Consider he says, count all joy, consider it, think about it. In other words, trials in life that the battles we face every day often expose our spiritual immaturity.

They expose quite often that we aren't dependent on God, that we respond in a sinful and godless way, that there's things that do need rooted out, that he wants to root out from our hearts, anger or pride or greed, or there may be idols that we're clinging on to much more closely than we are clinging on to Jesus.

And sometimes trials just expose that or highlight that and bring it out. And he wants us to ask the question, what is God teaching me and what is God saying to me through this?

So trials can either be an opportunity for spiritual self-analysis, that we look at our lives, say, what is God doing in this? What is God saying and speaking to me?

Or an opportunity for self-absorption. Poor me. It's dreadful. It is an awful God and other people are miserable and it's their fault that I'm going through this.

[23 : 31] It's their problems. They need to change. Not me. I'm in the right place that they need to change. Whereas wisdom asks different questions, doesn't it?

So wisdom asks different questions. And wisdom also, it trusts through doubt. He speaks a lot in this section about doubt and he says, but let him ask in faith without doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

The person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He's double minded man and stable in all his ways. And that's a difficult section.

But faith is taking your doubt to God. That's probably the difference. Is that faith says, Lord, I believe but help my unbelief and we take our doubt to God and we trust him through it.

Whereas genuine doubt, which he's speaking of here, is the doubt which doesn't really believe in Jesus after all and doesn't really believe in his promises and doesn't believe that good will come from the trials in our own lives and stems from a deadening relationship, a prayerless relationship, a relationship that doesn't ask and it doesn't pray and it has then become subsumed by doubt.

[24 : 54] So prayer points us towards God even in our doubt and that is a different reality. Ask the right questions.

It trusts through doubt but also wisdom that God promises to give us, I think, clearly finishes well. The Christian life finishes well.

He talks about becoming perfect and complete or mature, lacking nothing. I think the danger for us, and maybe this is more of a challenge for those of us who are longer in the tooth spiritually, who have been Christians longer, the dangers that commute of life, the sheer grind of living out the Christian life overwhelms us because for too long we've just gone on our own.

We've gone it alone. We haven't prayed, we haven't asked and we've just survived but we've grown cold spiritually.

We kind of got you get to that cynical stage where you dismiss the faith that you used to have in your youth and you lower your standards spiritually and you're less committed than you once were because you've allowed this world just to choke your relationship with them.

[26 : 09] So you have no time to pray. The trials of life and the midlife crisis that I'm going through is too great for God to deal with and so we become drifting, we're drifters in this commute of life.

And that self-serving Christianity is a spiral downwards and you read a book like James when you're in that condition and you hate it because it makes you feel guilty and it feels legalistic because you think there's all these things we're supposed to do and you forget that it's impossible and you forget that he wants to drive you back to himself and it will crush us.

And I think many Christians are in danger of not finishing well and that's a terrible thing and it's one as we mature in our faith we must be aware of that we don't lower our standards and forget what God promises to do for us.

So God when we ask we ask for wisdom which enables us also to finish well and it provides the last thing about wisdom here is it provides us settle the joy.

Count it all joy. If anything is counter cultural that's what it is. Count it all joy when you have a weekend free. Count it all joy when you look at your bank balance and it's full and to overflowing.

[27 : 38] Count it all joy when your partner in life constantly says how gorgeous you are in every facet of your being. Count it all joy when everyone at work just polishes your shoes and thinks you're just God's gift.

Count it all joy when you get A pluses in all your exams without doing any work for it. That's the kind of thinking subconsciously sometimes we have but here he says count it all joy when you face the commute of life.

It's not very exciting is it? It's not very dramatic but yet it is because he takes these ordinary things and transforms them so that we can become mature and complete as people complete.

We don't rejoice in the trials themselves. We're not masochists. We don't look for them but we rejoice in what God can take from these miserable trials and in the brokenness of this world and teach us about himself and teach us about ourselves and the promise that he is working as we've seen in the morning this mission of God.

He's working to complete us and to remind us that there is a future that is trial free that is all these things that we look for that is an eternity of bucket list spiritually that is constantly knowing and learning and exploring and understanding the glories of relationship with him where as we finish this morning service with there will be no more tears.

[29 : 26] That is what in the commute of life we see is that we ask that's what he wants from us. That's what he wants from you tomorrow.

Whatever busyness you face tomorrow and whatever gut wrenching and stomach turning trials you know you will face tomorrow. Ask.

Speak to him. Deal with him. And then recognise he gives. We ask he gives. Isn't that great?

Ask of God. What does he do? He gives generously to all without reproach. That's what he does. That's what God gives. That's why this book is the book of grace.

Go again to 4 verse 6. He gives more grace. That's the anthem of this book. He gives more grace. You're struggling. Ask for the wisdom of grace and for all that goes with it.

[30 : 26] Ask for what we're lacking. Ask for the ability to take the trials which we would much rather avoid and not have and face them head on.

Eyeball to eyeball with them and enable God to take them and transform us through them which will be absolutely counter cultural to those who see us going through these trials.

He's a giving God. That's his nature. God gives. He gives. God gives. That's his. That's what he is. That's what the cross is about. That's what grace is.

That's what it's about, a God who gives. You and I struggle powerfully with the concept of a giving God. We think God's miserly. We think God doesn't really want to give.

Think about it. We do. We think God doesn't want to give. But he's a giving. It's his nature.

[31 : 26] It's the mission of God is the blessings that he speaks about and in this broken world that remains the blessings through trials. He gives generously. That is, he doesn't give miserly.

You ask, you don't have wisdom? If I could honestly say there was one prayer that I have offered almost every day of my ministry of life, it is that God would give me wisdom.

And it says gift because we don't have that gift naturally. The spiritual wisdom that enables us to be counter cultural and grace filled.

It's outstanding. He gives it generously. He wants us to have it and he wants us to respond his way. And it's to all.

It's not just to the minister. It's not to a select few Christians who gives generously to all, to all. Everyone who asks, we're all equal here.

[32 : 28] We all need. We all face trials some more than others possibly, but he promises to give all. All he asks is that we ask.

And without reproach, he says, without reproach, he doesn't give us scoldingly. You know, as parents, we sometimes give gifts to our children, scoldingly.

Kind of, well, I'm going to give you this, but you don't really deserve it. And I'm not really that happy about giving it to you, but I'm a really good parent anyway, and I'm going to.

And there's an element of scolding there as if in needing there was guilt. That God doesn't give us scoldingly.

He doesn't tell us off. He doesn't say, I told you so. He understands. He knows that verse. I'm saying it links so well with this morning. Amazing verse at the beginning of Vex says when it talks about the people who cried out and it just finishes with this word, he knows.

[33 : 35] He knew, he knew, he knew. God knows and he says, hang in there. You will blossom because I will use the trials to bring you to maturity.

And his maturity is the best maturity there is. And it's what we were created to be, to be mature in him. That's where we will find ultimate pleasure.

And that's where we will find pleasure in pleasure, the way he wants us to find it, not as an end or an idol in itself. And for us, the recognition is the best is yet to come.

Because it all joy when you meet, when you meet, and all of us do. And James wants us to take that great grace and for us not to be in here being hearers of the word only because that's, we're deceiving ourselves.

But to be doers to take it from here into the trials you will face and I will face tomorrow. Amen. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that in the trials of life, which we will all face tomorrow and face today, may we not blame you, tempting though it often is.

[34 : 56] May we not blame others, but may we see and know that your business is with us, that you transform us.

And as we are transformed through these trials and recognize you will mold us through them, that we would find a peace and a joy that will blow us away.

Help us we pray, Lord God, to recognize that this is not a legalistic council of despair. It is not providing something for us to reach up to in our own strength, but causes us to fall in our knees and to ask for help.

And may we be an asking for help people and may we ask for help for each other and recognize ourselves as children who cry out to our Father.

Amen.